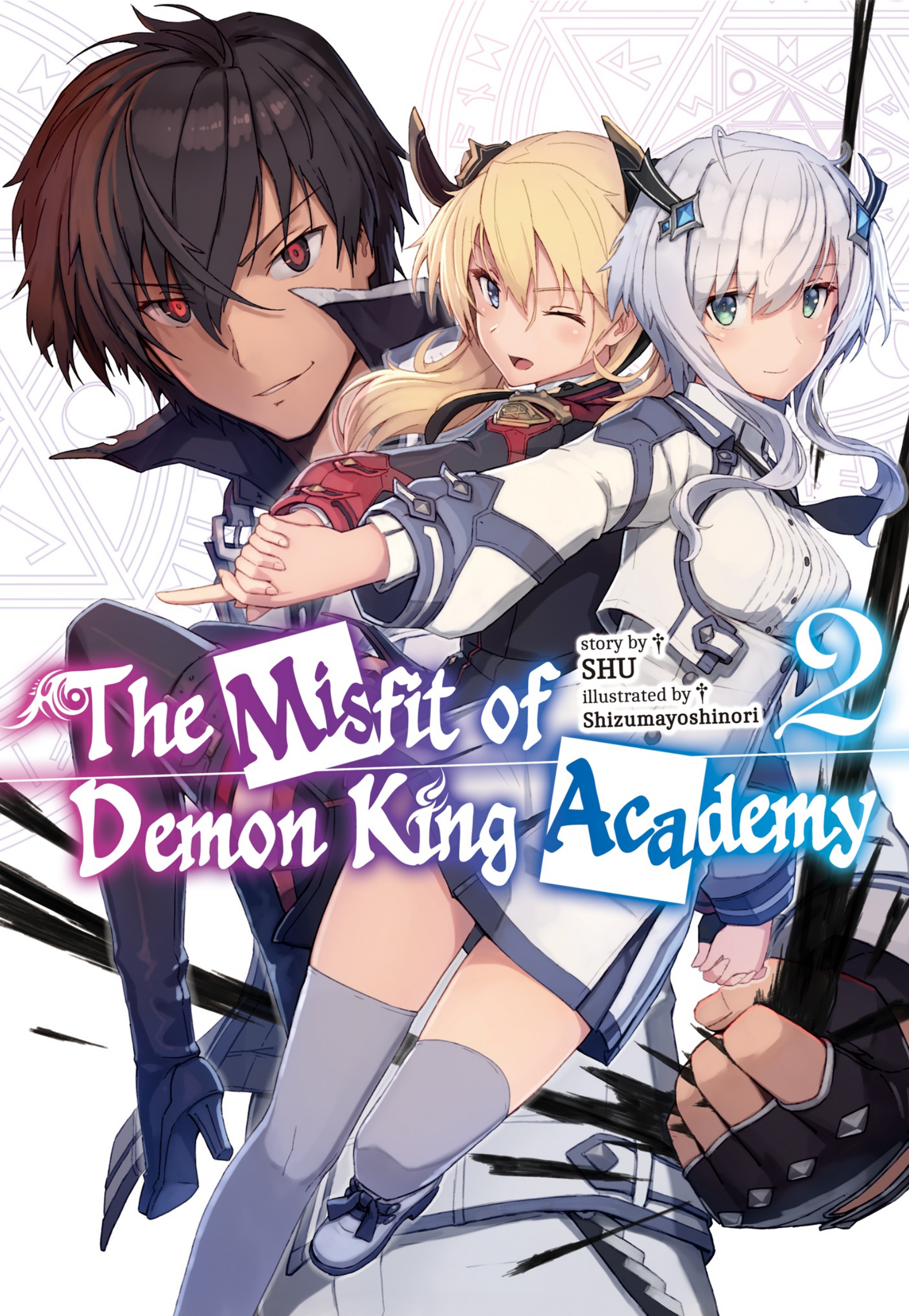




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The Misfit of
Demon King Academy





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The Misfit of Demon King Academy

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THE MISFIT OF DEMON KING ACADEMY

Keywords

Spirits

Beings formed of the legends and rumors of the world. Spirits possess both a true and a transient form. The more widely spread a spirit's lore of origin, the stronger they are and the more faithful to legend their true form is.

Royalists and Unitarians

The era of peace that followed the Mythical Age. Contrary to its name, magic technology has degraded dramatically since the prior era. Many higher grade spell formulae have been forgotten, with some spells being entirely lost to time.

Anos Fan Union

A group of Anos-loving fanatics, who claim to believe he's the Demon King of Tyranny. Beneath the surface, they are a lower branch of the Unitarians consisting of mixed-blood students unhappy with the current status quo.

Demon Sword

The seven demons Anos created from his own blood two thousand years ago, who are now leaders of demonkind. Existences that were created from magic and not domination, as the precursors to a body of his own blood that Anos could reincarnate into.

Reincarnation

The act of being reborn into a different being with the same source using the source magic Syrica. In order to inherit all memories and power, a substantial level of mastery is required and several conditions must be met.



Designed by Suzuki Toru

§ Prologue: Demon King's Right Hand

Two thousand years ago.

Ahalthern, Forest of the Great Spirits.

An eight-headed water dragon was rampaging in the pouring rain.

All spirits possess both a transient and a true form. While in their true form, they also possess far greater power, but it isn't uncommon for their mind to stray.

Spirits are strange creatures. Their existence is said to come to be from the hearts of others. Legends, folklore, rumors, desires, fears, aspirations... They are the realization and embodiment of all of the above. One's extreme fear of fire has the potential to birth fire spirits, and a rise in religious faith can birth water spirits.

The rampaging eight-headed water dragon had been born from the legend that water had been brought into the world by a god's teardrop that had fallen on Ahalthern. This dragon was the true form of the Great Water Spirit Lignon.

As the protector of the great spirits, Lignon was enraged by the intruders seeking to burn down the forest. And those fearless invaders, unafraid of the formidable power of Lignon, were led by none other than the Demon King of Tyranny, Anos Voldigoad.

"Hmm," said the mighty Demon King. "Half my people were taken out with a single blow. Her power lives up to the rumors."

Anos took a step forward, preparing for battle. However, another demon came forward to stop him. The demon was clad in armor and had a sword sheathed at his waist. He had white hair and colorless eyes, his expression cool even amidst the battlefield.

The demon knelt before the Demon King, bowing his head. "If I may make a suggestion, my liege."

“Speak.”

“There is no need for you to trouble yourself over such inferior opponents. By your leave, I shall cut her down with a single strike.”

Anos chuckled. “Shall we make a wager, then? If it takes you more than one strike, you’ll stop speaking to me in such a stiff manner. If you succeed, I shall reward you with anything you like.”

“You jest, my liege,” the demon replied. “Surely you know that that won’t be a wager at all.”

There was a metallic clink as his sword returned to its sheath. The next instant, the rampaging eight-headed dragon dispersed into countless pieces, washed away by the pouring rain.

Shortly after, a patch of clear sky appeared above the forest.

“Will that do?”

“Your sword skills are as sharp as ever, Shin.”

The demon still kneeled on the ground with his head bowed. He had vanquished the Great Water Spirit—as well as slashed away the pouring rain—without moving from his position.

Shin Reglia was the right hand of the Demon King, the owner of a thousand demon swords, and the strongest swordsman of demonkind. The sword at his waist was a regular iron sword—he hadn’t needed to draw a demon sword to defeat Lignon.

“Even I might be in danger if I fought you,” the Demon King said.

“You’re far too modest, my liege. Even with a thousand swords, I would be no match for you.”

Anos chuckled at his overly devoted follower’s words. “Then how about a match with swords alone?”

“With all due respect, I believe I may be able to scratch you.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. You’re the right hand of the Demon King. You should at least be able to take an arm.”

With his head still lowered, Shin replied quietly. “If that is what you wish.”

Hearing this, Anos burst into hearty laughter. The Demon King knew his loyal follower would never do such a thing. Shin would rather end his own life than point his sword at his master, even if in jest. That was the kind of man Shin Reglia was.

“Say, Shin, wouldn’t it be nice if we could cross swords in a peaceful era, just for fun?”

“Indeed.”

That era won’t be too far away, Anos thought to himself.

“Incidentally, I lost the wager. What do you wish for as a reward?”

“I wish for your permission to reincarnate.”

“After I’ve constructed the walls?”

“These thousand swords are dedicated to you, my liege. You shall die and one day return, but I cannot brazenly live on after your death.”

There’s really no helping this man’s nature, Anos thought in resignation.

“Source magic isn’t your strong suit, is it?” he asked.

Source magic, the highest grade of which included spells like Syrica, was that which affected one’s source. Anos would be capable of transferring all his power and memories to his reincarnated body, but those who struggled using source magic would reincarnate imperfectly. They would lack power and memory.

“Relearning the sword in a new era doesn’t sound so bad.”

Shin was a seeker of the path of the sword. He was known for being the strongest swordsman of demonkind, yet he had once lost to the Hero Kanon in a sword fight. He was possibly feeling the limits of his current vessel. An incomplete reincarnation, however, offered the potential for him to gain greater power. Perhaps he wanted to gamble on that potential.

“All right.”

“I am eternally grateful for your compassion, my liege. Though I may lose my

memories in reincarnation, my source will never forget you.”

“No need to be so stiff. Do as you please.”

After Anos said those words, he used Leaks to address the entirety of Ahalthern. “How long will you all play dead? Rise, my followers. Burn the forest and smoke out the Great Spirit Reno.”

At Anos’s call, his followers, previously slain by Lignon, got to their feet. They had been resurrected with Ingall. Black flames rose from the forest in no time at all, burning and fiercely spreading.

“Now...” Anos stared ahead. Through the flames of the forest, a figure was heading straight for him. “Hero Kanon has joined us.”

Hero Kanon, his holy sword in hand, was running towards them, closing a distance of approximately ten kilometers.

“It’s hard to believe his source was destroyed just yesterday,” Shin commented.

One cannot live if their source is destroyed. Not even Ingall would have an effect. The only exception to this was Hero Kanon. He was capable of resurrecting over and over again. The reason was simple—unlike normal people with a single source, Kanon possessed seven. As long as one of those sources remained, the remaining six could be restored.

Demon King Anos could use almost every spell in existence, but he was no match for source magic. Shin had lost to Kanon for the same reason. No matter how many times Kanon was defeated, he would always come back to life. Meanwhile, he would only need to destroy one source to defeat an opponent.

It was an unfair matchup, but that was what it took to go against the Demon King. Even if challenged an infinite number of times, Anos had no doubt he would win every match.

“Shin, I shall handle Kanon. You search for the Great Spirit Reno.”

“As you wish.”

No sooner had Shin replied than he disappeared.

“Now, Hero Kanon... How many times will I have to kill you today?”

Anos deployed sixty magic circles of Jio Graze, launching them all at the Hero simultaneously.

§ 1. Unitarians

The Magical Age.

Once school break ended, I returned to Delsgade as before.

Today was the first day of lessons since the dungeon exam, and the results were to be announced in class. I entered the second lecture hall to find Misha and Sasha in their seats on either side of mine.

“Hey,” I called out to them, taking my seat.

“Good morning,” Misha replied in her quiet voice.

“Morning,” Sasha echoed. She leaned forward over my desk. “Say, did you resolve that misunderstanding?”

“What misunderstanding?” I asked.

Sasha sighed in exasperation. “I’m talking about your parents. They still think Misha and I are going to marry you. It’s completely absurd. What are you going to do about it?”

“Hmm. Do you hate the idea that much?” I replied.

Sasha blushed and turned away. “That’s not what I’m asking...stupid,” she muttered weakly.

“If you have a problem with it, why don’t you tell them yourself?”

Sasha turned back to me and glared, her Magic Eyes of Destruction appearing in her pupils. “It’s your fault for complicating things by putting a ring on Misha’s finger!”

I looked over at Misha. She still wore the Lotus Ice Ring on her left ring finger. “You need to look deeper into the abyss. Magic items and their owners are naturally drawn to each other. I didn’t put the ring on her finger—the ring chose that finger itself. I’m sure Misha finds it uncomfortable on any other finger as well.”

Misha blinked a few times, then nodded. “It has meaning here.”

“Meaning?” I inquired.

“The left ring finger means betrothal.”

“Ah, so that’s it. No wonder mom was in such a state.”

That said, it was quite normal for mom to be overly excited. I didn’t quite get the reason for it, but her misunderstanding of my engagement was probably what had caused her to go on and on about my happiness.

“I can’t believe you,” Sasha interjected. “You didn’t even know that?”

“I’ve only just been reborn.”

Misha blinked at me. “Engagement rings didn’t exist two thousand years ago?”

“Nope. Betrothals back then were formed with Zecht. There was no fear of betrayal that way.”

“What? Were the people back then completely heartless?” Sasha asked, frowning.

I laughed and nodded. “In the Mythical Age, everyone was in the midst of war. Acting on love and infatuation alone would lead straight to death.”

“Hmm... So that means...” Sasha murmured, looking up at me. “You didn’t love anyone...?”

Without a word, I stared straight back at her.

She looked away, hiding her face. “S-Say something...”

“I wasn’t expecting a question like that. It’s a rather refreshing feeling.”

Someone I loved, huh? Me, of all people.

“Has no one asked you that before?”

“No. I suppose no one thought the Demon King of Tyranny capable of falling in love—and they were right. There was no leeway for such things in that era.”

Who to kill next, where next to destroy... I had been fully occupied with protecting Dilhade, and everything else before me. The fact I was gossiping

about whom I may have loved was a stark contrast to back then.

“Hmm. It’s not like I have anything to do until Avos Dilhevia makes a move. Perhaps it wouldn’t be so bad to fall in love in such a peaceful world,” I told Sasha.

Her cheeks flushed. “Wh-Why are you telling me this?”

“Is there a problem?”

“Th-There’s no problem, but...” she muttered, trailing off weakly.

“Say, Sasha...”

“What?”

“Your face is red.”

Sasha hid her face in her arms. “I-It’s not red, you idiot!” She glared at me from behind them, turning swiftly away when she realized I wouldn’t falter.

“Anos.”

I turned at the sound of Misha’s voice.

“Should I take it off?” she asked, showing me the Lotus Ice Ring.

“Why?” I asked.

Misha stared into my eyes. “You said you want to fall in love.”

“Oh, I said that on a whim.”

“It’ll give people the wrong idea.”

If she wore the ring I’d given her on her ring finger, people might assume we were engaged. She was offering to take it off in case it impeded my search for love.

“Do you want to take it off?” I asked her.

For a moment, Misha’s eyes widened. She returned to her blank expression to think, then shook her head faintly.

“Then keep it on for as long as you wish. I’m not petty enough to dictate how others use their gifts.”

“It won’t give people the wrong idea?”

I dismissed her concern with a laugh. “Misha, I don’t fear misunderstandings. No matter how many people get the wrong idea, the truth won’t change. People can misunderstand all they want.”

“Sorry to interrupt when you’re in the middle of acting cool,” Sasha interjected, “but you should be a little scared. Especially when it involves your parents.” Then she seemed to remember something. “Oh, speaking of which, there was something I’ve been meaning to ask for a while now—”

Just then, the bell rang, and Emilia entered the classroom.

“What is it?”

“Never mind. I’ll ask later,” Sasha said, turning to face the front.

“Good morning, everyone. I shall now announce the results of the last dungeon exam.”

Emilia began writing each team’s score up on the blackboard. None of the others had reached the underground vault, and so most scored between thirty and fifty points. The highest score thus far was seventy points.

“And finally, the score for Team Anos. Team Anos brought back the scepter said to be located on the bottommost floor.”

At Emilia’s words, murmurs broke out across the classroom.

“However,” she continued, “I regret to inform you that the scepter was stolen by someone before it could be appraised.”

The murmurs of my peers grew louder.

“Delsgade is doing everything in its power to locate the culprit. Until the situation is resolved, Team Anos will receive a provisional score of seventy points.”

“That’s unacceptable,” Sasha declared, slamming her hands on the desk and standing up. “It’s the academy’s fault the scepter was stolen. If you’re going to give us a provisional score, shouldn’t it be one hundred points?”

“I understand your feelings, Sasha, but many possibilities had to be

considered. This is what was decided.”

“What possibilities?”

“This was the academy’s decision. I cannot elaborate further.”

Sasha glared at Emilia, barely restraining her Magic Eyes.

“Maybe they stole it themselves to get full marks,” a derisive voice piped up.
“Before it was revealed that the scepter was a fake.”

This triggered more noise from the rest of the class.

“Ah, I see. That’s another way of looking at it.”

“Right. No matter how good at magic he is, he’s still a misfit...”

“And he’s a white-uniform. Honestly, there’s no way anyone other than royalty could have obtained that scepter. It makes more sense for this whole thing to be a charade.”

“But they have Lady Sasha.”

“Lady Sasha must be out of her mind, joining the team of a misfit like him.”

Hearing the chatter, Sasha turned her destructive gaze on the class. “Let me make one thing clear,” she started. Tension flooded the room. “Anos has done nothing wrong. How long are you going to obsess over his mixed blood and the fact that he’s a misfit? If you have any doubts despite him constantly proving his strength, you can look me in the Eyes and say it.”

The room fell silent, and not a single student made eye contact with Sasha. I couldn’t help but burst into laughter.

“Hey, Anos? What’s so funny?”

“Oh, nothing really. This is just a rather dramatic change in attitude. Well said, my loyal follower.”

Sasha pouted unhappily. “That sounds like you’re making fun of me...”

“Now, now. Put away those dangerous Eyes. There’s no need to get so heated over a mere exam score. It’s not like it actually matters.”

“But you said you wanted full marks...” Sasha mumbled.

What, so she was mad about that? How cute.

As Sasha sat back down with the fight drained from her, someone behind us raised their hand.

“I, too, believe the academy’s decision is wrong!”

A student in a white uniform stood up. She had large, round eyes that complemented her charming face, and chestnut brown hair that reached her shoulders.



“Hmm. And this was...?” I asked.

“Misa Ililorogue,” Misha whispered in my ear.

“Ms. Emilia,” the girl continued, “you said there were many possibilities to consider. What if the scepter had been stolen by a student wearing a black uniform? Would they have been treated the same?” Misa demanded to know. “Don’t you think this is discrimination against us hybrids?”

The students around her, who all wore white, spoke up one after the other in agreement, as if venting their pent-up emotions.

“That’s right!”

“We’re always the ones being picked on!”

“What’s so good about royalty?! Not even one of the Seven Demon Elders could stand up to Lord Anos, much less a teacher!”

“The school won’t acknowledge him as the true Demon King because the royals want to protect their positions!”

Emilia, however, dismissed them all coldly. “Misa, demon royalty are those who purely inherit the founder’s blood. It’s only natural for those deemed more likely to become the founder’s vessel to receive preferential treatment. I’m sure you understand that treating royalty and mixed-bloods as equals is considered prejudice against the higher born.”

“And I’m saying that’s wrong. Why do we have to be disregarded for having less of the founder’s blood when we’re no less demon than they are?”

Emilia sighed. “Unitarian activism is forbidden within the academy. Please take your seat, or I’ll have to punish you accordingly.”

“How can you be so certain that royalty is always right? What if it was royalty that stole the scepter to prevent white-uniform students from getting full marks?”

“That’s absolutely impossible. You may leave class for today. I shall inform you of your punishment later.”

“How can you be sure it’s impossible?”

“That’s enough from you. I shall now begin the lesson.”

“Ms. Emilia! Are you running away?”

Emilia took no notice of Misa, turning to write runes on the blackboard.

“Now, for today’s lesson...”

I raised my hand.

“What is it, Anos? If this is about the scepter, then I’ve already explained the situation. You’ll receive a provisional score until the academy finds the culprit. That is the final word.”

“Hmm. So all we have to do is find the culprit, yes?”

Emilia looked taken aback. “That is correct, but...”

“The scepter has Maze cast on it.”

“What?”

Maze is a spell that creates a mark of magic power, allowing the marked target to be tracked down with Magic Eyes. With power like mine, nothing could hide or be hidden from me, no matter where it was in the world.

“I see, so that’s where it is.”

I stood up and walked forward, stopping before one student. If I recalled correctly, this guy had been the first to accuse us of stealing it ourselves.

“Wh-What do you want, Anos?” the student in black said. “Just so you know, I wasn’t the one who stole it. If you want to accuse me, you’ll have to prove it—Gah!”

My right arm pierced through the student’s abdomen.

“Not a bad hiding place, but if you’re going to store it in your body, you need better magic resistance. It’s in plain sight.”

I pulled the scepter from the student’s body. He collapsed to the floor, and I stepped on his head. “Did you think you could get away with taking my possessions, you little thief?”

I cleaned the bloodstained scepter with magic and walked over to Emilia. “Absolutely impossible for royalty to do this, was it? How peculiar. It seems the

absolutely impossible has occurred—whatever should we do about this, Emilia?”

Speechless, Emilia opened and closed her mouth.

I gently placed the scepter in her hand and smirked. “Should’ve hired a better thief.”

She flinched.

Bull’s-eye. And to think I’d been taking a stab in the dark.

“Just kidding. Please begin the lesson.”

After healing the fallen man’s stomach, I returned to my seat. Squeals of admiration I had never experienced erupted from behind me.

“Oh my goodness, Lord Anos is sooo handsome!”

“Honestly, he’s too hot to handle! He’s strong, smart, and a white-uniform to boot!”

“He even healed a guy like that. Just how kind can he be?!”

“Right? But you know, I’m a little envious of that guy.”

“Huh? What for?”

“Because, you know, he had Lord Anos’s hand in his stomach! I want Lord Anos’s hand in my stomach too!”

“Uh... Wouldn’t that hurt?”

“Who cares about a little pain? It’s Lord Anos’s hand!”

“Hmm... I’d rather be stepped on...”

Hmm. There were a few questionable opinions among the lot, but it seemed the wind was blowing in a new direction.

§ 2. Union

Class ended, and it was time for lunch break. The students all stood up and left the classroom.

Our team's score would be determined after the academy appraised the scepter. I doubted they would attempt to steal it again, but it truly seemed as though this academy didn't want to recognize a misfit like me. The reason probably had something to do with the Unitarians that Emilia had mentioned.

"Lord Anos!"

Just as I stood up, a girl in a white uniform called out to me. It was Misa Iliorogue, the one who'd lashed out at Emilia earlier.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Thank you for sticking up for me earlier."

"Don't mention it. That wasn't my intention."

Misa smiled cheerfully. "Nonetheless, I was able to avoid punishment thanks to you. If you hadn't found the scepter, I would have been suspended from school for a while."

Hmm. So she had chosen to speak up knowing the punishment. I could respect that.

"Misa, was it?"

"Yes. I'm honored you remember my name."

"I have one question: what are the Unitarians?"

Misa answered without breaking her smile. "You're aware that Dilhade is mostly ruled by royalty these days, right?"

"I've had my suspicions, but I don't know the details. Could you enlighten me?"

"Gladly," Misa agreed, beginning her explanation. "Each region of Dilhade is

governed by demon lords, but only royalty can graduate from the Demon King Academy into those positions. All the power is held by royalty—we hybrid demons cannot make any decisions for Dilhade. Demons are currently divided into royalty and non-royalty, regardless of ability.”

There were several possible combinations of demon bloodlines—demon royalty mixed with hybrid demons, demon royalty mixed with humans, and hybrid demons mixed with humans. Despite all the possible varieties, anyone who wasn’t pure-blooded was considered a hybrid.

“The demons who push for royal supremacy and demand privileges for pure-blooded demons are known as Royalists. Unitarians are the demons that wish for demonkind to be united regardless of bloodline.”

“With royalty dominating this country, can you even conduct sufficient Unitarian activism?” I asked.

If their movements were forbidden at the Demon King Academy, things wouldn’t be much different elsewhere.

“Of course. It isn’t easy, but we have a powerful sponsor backing us.”

Well that was unexpected. But it made sense—they wouldn’t have been able to act against royalty until now without a powerful backer. Peace didn’t mean freedom of speech, after all.

“A sponsor?”

“It’s Demon Elder Melheis Boran. Despite being one of the Seven Demon Elders, he agrees with the beliefs of us Unitarians.”

A Demon Elder, huh? That made things a little more complicated. It would be easy to understand the Seven Demon Elders all being Royalists—as the ones running the Demon King Academy, their motive for branding me a misfit would be to promote someone else—or even themselves—for the position of Demon King.

However, Unitarians wanted demons to be treated equally regardless of bloodline. If their view was accepted, there would have been no point in branding me a misfit.

Perhaps this meant the Seven Demon Elders weren't all on the same page. Or was there something else to be gained from supporting the Unitarians? At any rate, I needed to hear Ivis's report before coming to any conclusions.

"If you're interested in the Unitarian movement, shall I introduce you to Lord Melheis?" Misa offered.

This offer couldn't be taken as mere sincerity. If he wished to make contact with me, it was possible the Demon Elder was plotting something. But if the other side was making a move, there was no reason to remain idle.

"I'd appreciate that, but is he someone that can be met so easily?"

"Yes, I'm sure he'd be glad to meet you."

"Oh? And why is that?"

"We Unitarians believe that you are the Demon King of Tyranny. The strength you displayed at the team exams, the wisdom you demonstrated in the greater magic lesson—none of it could have been accomplished by an ordinary demon."

Once one's lineage was removed from the picture, ability was everything. In that way, it was only natural for them to believe I was the Demon King of Tyranny. That said, a lot had happened until now. For them to believe me this easily was actually rather concerning. Perhaps for the Unitarians, I was a convenient symbol of their movement that they could easily promote.

"Um, is something the matter...?"

"No. In that case, please arrange things with Melheis."

"Got it." Misa beamed. "Also, if it's all right with you, would you like to come visit our meeting place? Everyone would be delighted to meet you!"

Hmm. I could see no harm in going. Might as well.

"Lead the way."

"Of course! Follow me!"

With a spring in her step, Misa began walking. She led me out of the lecture hall and across the grounds. Misha and Sasha followed closely behind.

“So you two are coming as well?” I asked them.

“Sasha wants to go,” Misha told me.

“So what? I’m a follower of Anos, so it should be fine if I go.”

Goodness, Sasha was always so full of curiosity.

“Misa, is it okay to bring them?”

Misa turned back and smiled. “I don’t mind at all. They both believe you’re the Demon King of Tyranny, right?”

Misha nodded.

“Don’t lump me together with you. I don’t believe it, I *know* it,” Sasha snapped.

What was she being so competitive for?

“I see. It sure sounds convincing when Sasha Necron from the Cohort of Chaos says so. You’re more than welcome to join.” Misa grinned cheerfully. “If possible, I’d love to hear how exactly you know—”

“That’s not something I can say at my discretion,” Sasha replied.

Misa looked at me.

“There’s no proof. If there was, I wouldn’t be branded a misfit,” I added.

“But Sasha said she knows for sure...”

“These two are special.”

Misa paused for a moment. “I see,” she mumbled. She seemed to be wondering why they were so special, but she didn’t press us any further.

For some reason, Sasha looked pleased. “Say, your friends are all Unitarians, right? If Unitarian activism is banned at Delsgade, wouldn’t meeting up like this be a problem?”

“It’s fine! We were pretty troubled by that at first, but we came up with a justifiable reason to gather together.”

Misa stopped in front of one of the union towers.

A number of the many towers in Delsgade were dedicated to unions—

organizations that allowed students with common interests and hobbies to gather and hold activities together. There were sword training unions, magic research unions—all kinds of groups, really.

At the entrance of the tower was a plaque, where the name of the union was written in large letters: *The Anos Fan Union*.

“Ehe he he, what do you think?” Misa asked gleefully. “We formed a union to support Lord Anos and become his official fans! We aren’t conducting Unitarian activism; we’re just talking about how delightful his words are, how imposing his presence is, how handsome he is, and so on!”

“Are you stupid?” Sasha snapped, even fiercer than before.

“You may think so, but this way we’re conforming to the school rules and can avoid punishment. As long as we follow the rules, Lord Melheis can watch out for us,” Misa explained, opening the door to the union tower. “Besides, the Anos Fan Union is just a facade. Behind this door, we spend every day holding serious discussions on how to thwart the oppressive rule of the Royalists.”

As we stepped inside the tower, the students inside turned in unison to look at me.

“Awaaaaaaah! It’s Lord Anos! It’s the real Lord Anos!”

“No way; it really is! Why? How?!”

“Oh my goodness, am I breathing the same air as Lord Anos right now?!”

“That’s right! I-It’s basically an indirect kiss!”

“C-C-Calm down! If that were true, you’d be indirectly kissing everyone here!”

Sasha gave Misa an unimpressed look. “Serious discussions, was it?”

“Ha ha ha... It’s embarrassing to admit, but everyone here found ourselves falling for Lord Anos’s charms without realizing it...”

“It’s just as embarrassing to watch.”

Just then, one of the students stepped boldly in front of me.

“L-Lord Anos! Can I have your autograph?!” she asked, casting Zecht.

Hmm. A contract vowing to be my fan for life, huh? There were no

disadvantages for me, but it was honestly a ridiculous Zecht to make.

“Hey, that’s not fair! I want one too!”

“Me too!”

Students gathered around me one after another, each casting their own Zecht. No matter how I looked at the contracts, they were all disadvantageous for them.

“Is this a common occurrence in this era?” I asked Misha.

She shook her head. “Only for celebrities.”

Me, a celebrity? That was an amusing thought.

“Even for a celebrity, wouldn’t this Zecht be rather problematic? There’s no meaning to it.”

“Were there no fan unions two thousand years ago?”

“I’ve never even heard of the concept.”

Misha thought for a moment. “Everyone just wants to prove their loyalty.”

Hmm. I see. Loyalty, huh? Come to think of it, Shin had given off a similar impression—he had taken pride in the act of swearing his allegiance to me. I’d thought he was the only demon odd enough to do so, but times were different now.

“E-Everyone, you shouldn’t corner him out of the blue,” Misa scolded, interrupting the students begging for autographs. “There’s a proper order of doing things.”

Sasha raised an eyebrow. “It seems you’re the only sensible one here. Are the Unitarians really okay?”

“They’re capable people when they want to be...” Misa replied, trailing off with an awkward laugh.

“Don’t worry about it, Misa,” I assured her. “A signature or two is no big deal for me.”

“Huh? Really? Then please sign mine as well!” Misa immediately cast Zecht, bowing her head as she offered it.

Sasha shot her an exasperated glare.

“Aha ha... He said it was fine...”

“What?! That’s so unfair, Misa! No cutting the line!” a student cried.

“That’s right. Everyone wants Lord Anos’s first autograph!”

“No, I shall not yield on this,” Misa declared, turning back to the girls. “I was the one who brought him here, so I have the right to receive the first autograph! I’ll fight you all for it if I have to!”

She took on a battle-ready stance, emitting particles of magic from her body.

Hmm. The wavelength of her magic was different than that of a normal demon. Was this...the power of a spirit?

“Even if it’s you, Misa, we won’t back down!”

“That’s right! We won’t give up on Lord Anos’s first autograph, no matter what it takes!”

The other students also began to release their magic, transforming the room’s atmosphere to one of volatility.

“Hey, calm down... Why are you fighting over something so stupid?” Sasha asked admonishingly, but the girls all snapped back.

“No! Lord Anos’s autograph is worth risking my life over!”

“Yes, I’d have no regrets dying over this. It may seem comical, but we won’t back down!”

“Sasha,” Misa said quietly, a sagacious look on her face. “Laugh at us if you want. We won’t lose in our feelings for Lord Anos. That is why the Anos Fan Union exists.”

Magic crackled and sparked, but just as they were about to strike, I opened my mouth. “Hmm. So this whole matter will be resolved if I sign them all at once, correct?”

At my words, the students froze.

“That might be true,” Misa replied, “but wouldn’t it be impossible for all of us to receive the first autograph? No matter how quickly you sign them, there’ll

still be a difference of one tenth to one hundredth of a second. That difference is what decides the first autograph to the rest...”

“Why are you getting so worked up over having the first autograph?” Sasha muttered. “One tenth of a second is basically no difference at all...”

“People have their own beliefs,” I affirmed. “There’s no need to laugh at them for it. However, they should stop dismissing such trivial matters as impossible if they truly believe I’m the Demon King of Tyranny.”

Much to the surprise of the students, I signed all of their Zechts at once.

“H-Huh? Awaaaah! Look! The contract’s been signed!”

“Mine too! And look—there’s no difference in the time stamp. Not even by one hundred thousandth of a second. It’s the exact same time!”

“It’s true! Now we all have the first autograph!”

“But how?! Is such a thing possible?!”

“Oh, it was just a matter of using Rivide to freeze time before signing all the Zechts at once,” I told them.

The room broke out into squeals.

“Stopping time to sign a Zecht? That’s so *hot*!”

“My heart’s gonna stop if he carries on like this!”

Well, this was troubling.

“Is a signature really worth so much fuss?” I wondered aloud.

“If you really think that way, don’t stop time over it...” a fuming Sasha grumbled beside me.

§ 3. Half a Demon Sword

“I...I apologize for all the fuss,” Misa said once the autograph session had ended. “Everyone was shaken by their first raw experience of Lord Anos.”

“That’s a terrible way of phrasing it,” Sasha muttered.

Misha nodded beside her. “Like meat.”

“You don’t have to expand on that.” Sasha sighed tiredly.

“But several members are from our class,” I observed. “It shouldn’t be their first time meeting me. What was so raw about that?”

“Oh, how should I put this... It normally feels like you’re detached from the rest of the world—like you can’t even see the rest of us. Even though we’re in the same class, today was the first time you really acknowledged our existence.”

“In all honesty, I hadn’t noticed you until today.”

“Aha ha... I figured...”

Misa seemed somewhat disappointed.

“Don’t let it bother you,” I assured her. “I tend to ignore things I have no interest in.”

“You’re not making it any better, you know,” Sasha said.

Misha nodded in agreement.

“But I’ve remembered you now. You can now savor my raw self as much as you wish.”

Sasha visibly cringed. “That phrasing is kind of indecent...”

“Raw Anos is indecent?” Misha piped up, tilting her head in curiosity.

“Never mind. It’s nothing you need to know about, Misha,” Sasha told her.

Misha looked away, perplexed. “But I’m curious...” she mumbled to herself.

“Oh my,” Misa said, smiling at the scene before her. “In that case, how would you like to join the Anos Fan Union? We’ll be able to teach you many things.”

“No!” Sasha snapped, directing her anger at Misa. “Definitely not! Don’t you dare teach weird things to my Misha! Can you stop leaping at chances to increase your numbers?”

“Oh! Then would you like to join as well?”

“Huh?! How did you even get there?” Sasha cried, raising her voice in surprise.

“Well, you’re worried about Misha, aren’t you? If you join together, you’ll have peace of mind!” Misa said, grinning.

“I refuse. I have no reason to join an organization like this.”

“I see. That’s a shame...” Misa leaned forward and whispered in Sasha’s ear. “If you join now, you’ll receive a bonus magic photocard of Lord Anos, taken in secret without his knowledge...”

“That’s”—Sasha glanced at me for a second—“not of any interest to me.” She then brought her face closer to Misa’s. “What kind of photos do you have?” she asked quietly.

“Tee hee! Do you want to see? We have a shot of him half-naked from when he was changing clothes.”

“H-Half-naked?! Wha— That’s so obscene... It’s inexcusable!” Sasha cried, blushing.

“Oh, is that not to your taste? We also stock more family-friendly photocards of his gallant expression...”

“W-Wait—”

Misa blinked. “Yes?”

“I’ll take a look at them, just in case,” Sasha said quickly. “*Just in case*,” she then repeated.

Hmm. What in the world were they talking about? It would be easy for me to listen in, but I supposed there was no need to eavesdrop.

“Be my guest. They’re on the second floor—I’ll show you up there. Lord Anos, could you wait here for a moment?”

“Sure.”

A seemingly won-over Sasha was then led away by Misa, heading for the second floor.

“You don’t want to go, Misha?” I asked the quiet girl beside me.

“I’d rather stay with you.”

“I see.”

“Yeah.”

After a while, Misa came running down the stairs.

“Sorry for the wait,” she said.

“Where’s Sasha?” I asked her.

“Heh heh heh... She’s enjoying herself right now,” Misa said with a smirk. Then, her expression turned serious. “Um, Lord Anos... There was something I wanted to ask of you...”

“What is it?”

“I know this may be a shameless request, but would you be willing to let us join your team?”

I see. Well, it was a reasonable request—all the other team leaders were royalty. Being part of any other team would mean the Unitarians would be reluctant to obey their orders.

“I have a condition for the initiation of new followers.”

“What would that be?”

“They have to be either strong or interesting.”

Misa smiled worriedly. “I knew it wouldn’t be easy...”

“So tell me, why are you doing all this?”

“By ‘this,’ do you mean Unitarian activism?”

“Yes. It’s true that Dilhade is controlled by royalty, and that demonkind has become divided, but that isn’t a major problem. The country is peaceful and well governed. Besides your lack of political power, your life should be rather comfortable.”

Although demon royalty was an issue, life was notably better than it had been two thousand years ago. After all, back in the Mythical Age, only the strongest survived. It was a luxury for the powerless to retain their lives.

“Is it not a dangerous venture for those without power to attempt to unite demonkind?”

“Yes... It’s exactly as you say.” Misa hung her head for a moment, but she soon looked back up with a bright smile. “If it’s all right with you, may I show you around the union tower? There’s something I’d like you to see.”

She looked at me earnestly, and she’d answered me readily enough.

“Lead the way.”

“Of course! Follow me.”

Misa started up the stairs while giving me a brief rundown of the union tower.

The second and third floors housed the Anos Fan Union. These floors were the center of their activities. I was given a short tour of the union’s assets, including a statue of myself, and their logs of my heroism from my enrollment until now.

The fourth floor was a living space where they could sleep over, and the fifth was overflowing with history books about Dilhade and demonkind. I flipped through a few of them, but not one recorded an accurate history of two thousand years ago.

We ascended one more set of stairs to reach the top floor. In the center of the room was a stone pedestal with a single demon sword protruding from it.

The sword was of peculiar craftsmanship. Its latent magic power would rival that of the masterpieces of the Mythical Age, but it was incomplete. The weapon was only one half of a whole sword that had been split down the middle.

“Is this what you wanted to show me?”

“Yes.”

Misa walked slowly forward, stopping in front of the demon sword. She stared at the blade, making no move to speak. I waited silently for her.

Eventually, she said quietly, “You might have noticed already, but I’m not pure demon. My father is a demon, but my mother was a spirit.”

Half spirit, half demon, huh? No wonder I could sense spirit power from her. But a demon and a spirit? That was even more surprising than demon blood mixing with that of humans.

“My mother passed shortly after I was born,” Misa said sadly. “My father has never spoken to me. I don’t even know his name or face.”

“Why’s that?”

“My father is a royal, and one of fairly high status. He might even be a demon lord governing one of the regions in Dilhade.”

“What does that have to do with it?”

Misha was the one to reply. “It’s the duty of royalty to create pureblood descendants. When a royal mixes nonroyal into their bloodline, their family loses their royal status up to three degrees of kinship.”

“I see. So it affects not only yourself, but also your relatives.”

Having a hybrid daughter didn’t mean your own blood was tainted. What an absurd way of thinking.

“It’s like Misha says. Of course, my father surely knows that as well. He wasn’t meant to fall in love with anyone other than another royal. But he must have loved my mother in spite of that.” Misa laughed half-heartedly. “That’s just my wishful thinking, though...”

Misa said that, but it seemed unlikely her father would have taken such a risk if he hadn’t loved her mother. He had placed his own position on the line by choosing her, after all.

“My father can’t afford to speak to me. If his half-spirit, half-demon daughter

were discovered, he'd lose everything. That's why he can't reveal anything about himself to me."

Things might have been different if his actions only affected himself, but he probably hadn't wanted to drag his family into it.

"He made contact only once, on my tenth birthday. An owl familiar arrived in secret and brought me this half of a demon sword."

Misa touched the hilt gently. "He isn't meant to leave clues like this. That's why I believe this is an unspoken message from my father, who must have the other half of this sword. The weapon may be divided now, but there'll come the day it can become whole again. There'll be a day when royalty and hybrids can join hands. My father is fighting for that, and he's telling me to wait for him to be able to come for me."

Misa turned back to me. "You're right. Dilhade is peaceful. The purebloods are excellent rulers, and even abandoned children like me are able to attend school and live comfortable lives." She paused there and laughed sadly. "But I'd rather live happily with my father in poverty than live alone in comfort."

Her words were teeming with emotion. "Fathers and daughters are ripped apart, unable to speak to each other. I want such tragedies to end with me. Everyone here is the same. All the Unitarians here have been chased into the shadows under the peaceful rule of royalty, unable to meet their parents, losing their family, and so on."

She looked at me pleadingly. "Nevertheless, there's a deep rift between our ideals and reality. When I saw you at the academy undermining royalty with your overwhelming power, I believed we'd finally found a ray of hope. That's why I can believe that you, Lord Anos, are the Demon King of Tyranny."

"Hmm. So what would you have done if I wasn't the founder?"

"That doesn't matter. If it meant we could seize this sliver of happiness, we would be prepared to fight even the founder," Misa declared. "We believe in your words when you say you're the Demon King of Tyranny."

So it wasn't the founder they needed. That made sense—there was no reason for the Unitarians to seek the founder, who had been a royal.

“Lord Anos, please lend us your strength. Please fight alongside us...”

“When’s the next team exam?” I asked.

Having not expected the question, Misa was unable to reply right away.

“The day after tomorrow,” Misha answered for her.

“Well then, Misa, face me the day after tomorrow.”

Misa’s jaw dropped in mute shock. It was her expression, rather than her words, that protested at the difference in strength between us. “But...”

“I didn’t say you have to win. I have no need to rely on powerful followers. If you’re truly prepared to fight the founder as you say, show me your resolve.”

Misa bit down on her lip and then nodded determinedly. “I understand. We’ll be sure to meet your expectations.”

“Right. With that sorted, let’s fetch Sasha and go eat lunch.”

We left the top floor and headed back downstairs.

“Speaking of which, are you skilled with a sword, Lord Anos?” Misa asked.

“No. My sword is only as strong as the brute strength with which I wield it. Why do you ask?”

“Demon sword training will be tomorrow. We were hoping to see more of your valiant form.”

Come to think of it, there had been some mention of that.

“It’ll be overseen by an unfamiliar instructor, correct?”

“Yes. According to Lord Melheis, the session might be taken by another of the Seven Demon Elders.”

Hmm. Avos Dilhevia was probably aware that I’d noticed by now. What would his next move be? It was time to see what he was made of.

“Also, the other students probably don’t know this yet, but a transfer student will be joining us.” Misa told me this in a meaningful tone, but I wasn’t paying any attention.

§ 4. The Demon Swordmaster

The next day.

The bell rang in Delsgade's second lecture hall, and Emilia entered the room. She was followed by a male student dressed in black.

"Good morning. I'd like to introduce a transfer student."

Emilia wrote a name on the blackboard: *Lay Grandsley*.

The student then stepped forward.



“Hi, everyone. I’m Lay Grandsley,” he said in a clear, refreshing voice. “I was meant to attend this academy from the start of the year, but due to some circumstances, I had to delay my enrollment. I’m sure there’s a lot I’ve missed, so I’d appreciate it if you could help me out. Thanks.”

White hair, pale-blue eyes, and an elegant, androgynous face that smiled faintly, giving off a cool impression.

“Hey...” someone muttered. “That guy has a seven-pointed star...”

“What are you? Stupid? Of course he does! That’s Lay Grandsley, one of the Cohort of Chaos. The Demon Swordmaster: an outrageous monster that can handle not only demon swords, but spirit swords and divine swords, which demons can’t normally use.”

“He was nowhere to be seen after those rumors saying he’d be enrolling, but I guess he just hadn’t arrived yet...”

One of the Cohort of Chaos, huh? It seemed he was as famous as Sasha.

“Lay, you can use Gyze, so you’re able to nominate yourself as a team leader. What would you like to do?” Emilia asked him.

“Let’s see... What should I do?” Lay said brightly. He didn’t seem the aggressive type.

“The other students have already joined teams, so you’ll have to get a group together by the exam tomorrow. Of course, you could join someone else’s team this time around, but with your strength, the other teams might be a little...”

Emilia was using her every word to nudge Lay towards becoming a team leader.

“I’ve not gotten to know anyone yet, so I think I’ll join one of the existing teams this time.”

“Huh?” Emilia squeaked in confusion, surprised by the unexpected comment made by one of the Cohort of Chaos. “V-Very well,” she then said. “It might be difficult to gather team members immediately, so let’s have you join another one for now. I’m sure there are many students who will wish to join your team later, so you can form your own team next time.”

“I’m not really suited for leading others,” Lay said frankly.

“I’m sure the leader of whichever team you join this time will say you’re more suited to leading than they are.”

Hmm. Emilia was really trying to support this guy. Was there a reason for that?

“Well then, let’s have you pick a team. Can all the team leaders stand up?”

“Oh, there’s no need for that.”

Emilia looked at Lay curiously. “Have you memorized the leaders already?”

“Nope, not at all,” he said, puzzling Emilia ever further. “But I do know one.”

With that, Lay started walking. The collective gaze of the class followed him, accompanied by whispers that reached my ears.

“Whose team is he going to join...?”

“He’s the Demon Swordmaster, right? Is there anyone in this class that can even lead a guy like that?”

“Ah! Maybe he thinks Lady Sasha is a team leader?”

“Oh yeah, that would make sense. There’s no way he’d think the Witch of Destruction joined the team of a white-uniform.”

Lay walked straight up to Sasha’s desk—then passed it, stopping before mine.

“Hi, I’m Lay Grandsley. It’s nice to meet you,” Lay said with a charming smile. “What’s your name?”

“It’s Anos Voldigoad.”

“Well then, Anos, will you let me into your team? Despite my looks, I’m pretty good with a sword. I’m sure I can be of use to you.”

Hmm. This was an unexpected offer.

“How did you know that I’m a team leader?”

“You have more magic than anyone else in this class.”

So he could sense my power without cowering in fear. That meant he had a considerable amount himself.

“Even though I’m wearing a white uniform?”

From Lay’s expression, it seemed he hadn’t noticed that until now.

“Oh. Now that you mention it...I was only looking at your power.” He chuckled at his own mistake. “That’s even more impressive. White-uniform students normally can’t become team leaders.”

“Rules are made to be broken.”

Lay laughed again. “I’d really like to join your team after all. You seem interesting.”

He held his hand out for a handshake. What a good-natured guy.

“L-Lay,” Emilia interjected, “it’s okay if you want to join someone else’s team, but Anos’s insignia makes him a little...”

“Insignia?” Lay looked at the badge on my uniform. “Ah, so you’re the rumored misfit? The first one in the history of the academy?”

“So it seems,” I replied.

“Hmm... If you’re a misfit with that much power, then what are the aptitude tests even for?”

Lay’s simple question threw Emilia for a loop.

“L-Lay! Those words would be considered blasphemy against royalty!”

“Ah, my bad. Can you pretend you didn’t hear that?”

“Pretend I didn’t hear...?!”

I couldn’t help but laugh at his blatant disregard for one’s lineage. “You’re an interesting one.”

“Really? Is that okay? I often get told that I can’t read a room.”

“That’s what’s interesting.”

Lay smiled brightly. “It’s the first time I’ve been complimented for it.” He then turned to Emilia. “There’s no rules against joining a misfit’s team, right?”

“There’s nothing in the rules, but...as royalty, and as one of the Cohort of Chaos that may one day serve as the founder’s vessel, you should make a

worthy decision for yourself,” Emilia said, implying an unspoken understanding.

“Got it. A worthy decision, was it?” Lay replied. He then turned to me once more, bracing himself with a serious expression. “In that case, would you let me join your team, Anos?”

Hmm. Did this guy think he merely needed to ask with a lordly expression? He really couldn’t read a room. Emilia was so surprised, she didn’t seem to realize both her eyes and jaw were open as wide as they could go. What a sight.

“Wh-What the hell? The Demon Swordmaster wants to be subservient to the misfit...”

“Yeah, even if it’s temporary, this isn’t right...”

“And here I thought the arrival of the great Lay Grandsley would mean the end of that misfit acting so high and mighty...”

And between the pathetic whines of the royal students...

“As expected of Lord Anos! He proved his superiority without even fighting! So *hot!*”

“Yup! Even the Demon Swordmaster was trounced by his charms!”

“Wait! I’ve just realized something serious.”

“What is it?”

“If he was trounced by Lord Anos’s charms...does that mean he fell in love at first sight?!”

“Huuuh?! Does that make Lay our rival?!”

“B-But he’s a man, so...”

“That doesn’t matter in the face of love!”

...came the bizarre comments of the fan union.

“You sure? It sounds like you’ll disappoint some people,” I said to Lay, referring to the royals.

He hummed in thought. “I was wondering what I would do if there were no good leaders to join, but that doesn’t seem like it’ll be a problem. You’re

definitely stronger than I am, right?” he asked plainly.

It seemed he didn't care one bit about my misfit status. It was unclear to what extent he was being genuine, but it didn't sound as though he was lying.

“Well, yes.”

“Then it's perfect. Following the orders of a capable leader suits my nature more.”

This freedom from the restrictions of royalty wasn't dissimilar from that of demonkind two thousand years ago.

“So what do you say?” Lay asked hopefully.

“Hmm. Let me think...” I pondered, looking him over one last time before giving him my answer. “No.”

Lay blinked in surprise. “Huh?”

“If you just want an easy time following orders, you can join someone else's team. If you insist on joining mine, you'll have to prove your strength.”

“Anos,” he said dramatically, suddenly showing his true face. “I said I'd follow the orders of a leader, but that doesn't mean I'm trying to take it easy. I have something I need to do at all costs—a duty to fulfill. Hence, I'll become your arms and legs and climb to the top of this academy. Please, take me!”

“I see. Then prove your strength.”

“How strange...” he said, returning to his refreshing smile. “I thought I was a pretty good actor...”

This man was difficult to grasp. He was as aloof as the air itself.

The Anos Fan Union, however, was beside itself.

“H-He rejected the Demon Swordmaster's request to join his team!”

“As expected of our Lord Anos! So assertive! So sophisticated!”

“Wait! I've just realized something serious.”

“What is it now?”

“Lay just said, ‘Please, take me’...”

“So he’s the bottom?!”

Ignoring their incomprehensible conversation, I turned to Misa. “Perfect timing. Misa, join Lay’s team with the union.”

“Huh? Oh...okay. If that’s what you want,” Misa agreed, albeit confusedly.

“Join forces and face me in the team exam. If you do well, I’ll accept you all as my followers.”

Misa thought for a moment, then nodded. “I understand.”

I turned back to Lay. “That work for you?”

“I’m not really suited to leading others, but...”

Hmm. He’d said the same thing earlier, and it didn’t appear to be out of modesty. Becoming a team leader was an essential step to becoming a demon lord, so this probably meant that, in spite of his power, he wasn’t interested in politics or governing others.

“You’re interesting. I’d like to have some fun with you, but I won’t force you if you’re not on board with the idea.”

“Well, it’s fine. I’m interested in you as well,” Lay responded, changing his mind so easily, it was almost anticlimactic. He then smiled coolly. “Go easy on me.”

“Sure. I’ll crush you with everything I’ve got.”

Lay gave me a strange look, then corrected himself. “I actually have a one-year-old daughter waiting for me.”

“Then you’ll have to fight with all you’ve got to get home to her.”

“Pfft.” Lay smirked, then burst into laughter. His supposed daughter had probably been a lie as well. What a whimsical man. “I wonder why...”

“Why what?”

“For some reason, it feels like you and I will get along well.”

“Hmm. What a coincidence. I was just thinking the same,” I replied on a whim. Strangely enough, I had a feeling it was true.

§ 5. Demon Sword Training

“Okay! Now that Lay’s team has been decided, let’s begin the lesson.”

With Lay having become a team leader just as she’d wanted, Emilia was in a much better mood.

“Today we’ll be holding a training session on demon swords. It’s a practical lesson, so please head over to the arena. The guest instructors have already arrived, so make sure to show proper courtesy.”

The students stood up and began to leave the lecture hall.

“Anos,” Misha called to me quietly as I began walking.

“Yes?”

“Do you know Lay?”

What an odd thing to ask.

“No. Did it look like I do?”

Misha nodded. “You looked like you were having fun.”

“Well, he’s a fun guy.”

Speaking of acquaintances, one of my followers should have reincarnated like I had. Perhaps this Lay was him.

Reincarnation varied from person to person. Depending on the level of one’s source magic, it wasn’t uncommon to be missing memories or power once reborn. That said, the important things were often stored deep down.

“We may have met two thousand years ago,” I admitted, pondering the possibility.

“Hey,” Sasha called out. She was already ahead of us. “If we don’t move, we’ll miss the start of class.”

“Let’s go,” I told Misha.

“Yeah.”

Together, we set off after Sasha.

When we reached the arena, we found the other students standing in a circle. At the center was Emilia, accompanied by two demons. One was a giant, over twice the height of your average demon. He had dark skin, muscular limbs, and a beard. The other was of normal height. He had long black hair and a sharp look in his eyes.

“Demon Elders Gaios Anzem and Ydol Anzeo will be supervising,” Emilia informed us.

The large one was Gaios, and the long-haired one was Ydol. The two appeared exactly the same as when I’d created them. The wavelengths of their magic were also similar, but it was possible their cores had been fused and taken over, as had happened with Ivis. At any rate, I hadn’t expected both of them to be here.

“Please grace them with your guidance, Lord Gaios, Lord Ydol.” Emilia bowed her head, then withdrew to a corner, where she wouldn’t be in the way.

“Hmph. Then let’s start with a little greeting.”

The voice was deep. Gaios raised his hand, and dozens of magic circles appeared overhead.

“One for every student,” Misha murmured beside me.

“So it seems.”

Magic gathered within the circles, and from the center of each, the hilt of a sword appeared. The students began muttering amongst themselves.

“Wh-What are those...? Demon swords?”

“Wait, that’s an insane amount of magic... If those fall on us...”

The students looked up at the swords dangling over their heads and backed away in fear.

“Whoa there! Don’t move, fledglings.” Gaios’s deep voice rang through the air, frightening the students into freezing. “That’s right, just stay right where

you are. If you move, you'll die."

He clenched his fist and swung his arm down with all his might.

"Hiyaaaaaaah!"

With that, he commanded the demon swords to rain down from their circles.

"U-Uwaaaaaaah!"

"Eeeeeek!"

Screams echoed through the arena, but all the students were unharmed. The demon swords had pierced the ground by their feet.

"Come on, then. Take those swords by the hilts and pull 'em out."

The students each grasped a demon sword timidly, doing as they'd been told.

"H-Huh? It's stuck..."

"What is this...? It's absorbing my magic?!"

"N-Nooo! I can't move my hand! H-Help meee!"

More screams rose across the grounds.

"Ha ha ha! Quit fussing, fledglings. This is what demon swords do. A true demon sword chooses its wielder. If you don't prove your worth to the sword, you'll end up in a world of pain. Put your magic into it, and make that blade submit. If you stand around in a daze, you'll end up dead."

Hmm. From what I could see, these were real demon swords rather than magic replicas. Gaios must have instantly ascertained the wavelength of each student's magic and assigned them a suitable sword.

"As you all know, the upcoming Demon Sword Tournament will soon be held at Delsgade. The best swordsmen from across Dilhade will assemble here. Unlike you fledglings, they're all masters of the sword. Participants must source their own demon swords for the tournament, but you're far from entering if you can't even handle these blades."

Gaios raised his voice to encourage the students. "If you wish to exert your dominance in the Demon Sword Tournament, draw your sword! I'll even let you keep it if you succeed."

Beside me, Sasha had planted her feet on the ground and was attempting to extract the sword with all her might, but she simply wasn't able to do it.

"Ha ha. Struggling, Sasha?"

"Shut up..."

Misha was also trying her best, but it wasn't going well. "I'm not good with swords," she said in a troubled manner.

Well, magic wasn't the decider of one's skills, after all.

Frankly speaking, the Lotus Ice Ring and Phoenix Mantle were far superior magic items than demon swords of this level, and the two of them were able to wear those without a problem.

Come to think of it, though, Shin had been able to use all kinds of swords without a hitch, but he had been absolutely helpless at wielding or wearing any other kind of magic item. Thanks to that, he had solved everything with swords alone and perfected his swordsmanship.

"You've not even tried to touch your sword, Anos. Don't tell me you're scared you can't pull it out?"

"Ha ha ha, ha ha ha! You're a riot, Sasha."

I glared at the demon sword before me. The next moment, it slid from the ground and floated up, submitting to me.

"H-Hey, look at that... Anos pulled his sword out without touching it..."

"Damn it, how did he do that? Just touching it is enough for me to feel faint. He's a monster..."

I grabbed the hilt of the floating sword.

"There's only one sword in this world I can't draw," I explained.

"Huh..." Sasha raised an eyebrow. "I expected you to say there's no sword you can't draw."

"There's a holy sword from the Mythical Age that was once wielded by the Hero. It was forged by a human artisan, inhabited by a sword spirit, and blessed by the gods to destroy me. Even I can't draw that one."

The only one able to use that sword had been Hero Kanon. Perhaps Shin might have been able to draw it, but he had never had the chance to try. Demons were particularly incompatible with holy swords. And anyway, since the sword had been created to destroy me, Shin would have attempted to destroy it rather than draw it.

“Now...” I started forward.

“H-Hey, what are you up to now?”

Hmm. It seemed Sasha was catching onto me.

“Oh, nothing much. I was just thinking of stirring up this boring lesson.” I stopped in front of Gaios, who seemed impressed.

“Hmph. There might be some promise in you, if you can draw a demon sword so easily.”

“You may be pleased, but I’m disappointed,” I responded. “I was wondering what kind of outrageous practice ‘demon sword training’ would be, but it’s simply child’s play.”

I could see Emilia’s flabbergasted expression in the distance, but Gaios merely placed his hand to his chin in thought. “Ha ha ha! You’re an amusing one. So in short, you want me to teach you a real lesson on how to use a demon sword in a fight, right? One like *this*—!”

Gaios raised his hand with a powerful sweep. A huge magic circle appeared midair, summoning a colossal demon sword, three times the size of Gaios himself.

He grasped it by the hilt and began swinging it around as though it weighed nothing. The wind pressure his swings created was enough to make the students stumble precariously, and their worried cries soon filled the grounds.

“Oh no, this is bad...! That’s Lord Gaios’s Supreme Demon Sword Grajetian...”

“That’s the sword that split the Nier Mountains in two. You can barely call something like that a sword!”

“Even Anos might die this time...”

Hmm. He had a decent amount of intensity, as a Demon Elder should. But my

goal wasn't merely to fight—it was to have a little fun as well.

“Why don't you play with us, Ydol?” I asked the long-haired elder, whose expression turned to one of displeasure.

“You want to take on two Demon Elders at once?”

“No, I want to fight two-on-two.”

Gaios beamed at my words. “Fine. We'll play by your rules. Who's the other?”

I glanced behind me. “Lay Grandsley over there.”

Lay, who had yet to touch his demon sword, looked at me curiously.

“Very well. We accept your challenge. Everyone else, stand back. We'll now demonstrate the true essence of a demon sword!”

Gaios thrust the Supreme Demon Sword Grajetian into the ground. A magic circle expanded across the arena, deploying a barrier around the two Demon Elders, Lay, and myself.

“Jeez,” Ydol complained. “There's always a student who forgets their place every hundred years or so.”

The Demon Elder spread his arms, casting two magic circles to summon a pair of swords. One was a sword of ice, the other a sword of fire.

“Oh?” Lay murmured, admiring them. “Those are the Demon Swords of Fire and Ice: Zeth and Ides. Talk about fascinating blades. A single scratch is enough for the former to burn a person to ashes, and the latter to freeze one solid.”

I walked over to my pureblood peer, who was still standing before the demon sword in the ground.

“More importantly,” he continued, “it seems you've dragged me into a battle against two of the Seven Demon Elders. Is this going to be okay...?”

“Don't worry about it; it's just a part of the lesson. No one's getting killed.”

“I'm fine with that part,” Lay said in a bright tone. “But wouldn't it be bad if we won?”

I failed to withhold my laughter. Ha! So that was what he was concerned about. He really was an interesting fellow. There weren't many demons in this

era that could speak so lightly of the Demon Elders.

“Fight to your heart’s content. Which one would you like to take on?”

Lay looked between the two Elders, analyzing them with his Eyes. “If I had to pick one, then the one with the blades of fire and ice. He seems harder to deal with with only one sword.”

“Oh? You’d deliberately choose to be at a disadvantage?”

“I’m trying to read the room and let my opponents see me struggle a little more.”

So he had no intention of losing. That was how it should be.

“Let’s race to see who wins first,” I suggested.

“If I win, do I get to join your team?”

Hearing those words, I smirked. “You’re more eager than you look.”

“This match seems way easier than facing you directly in the team exam, at least.”

Lay reached out and drew the demon sword with no effort at all. Then, swinging his arm with all his might, he flung it at Ydol.

Briefly surprised, the Demon Elder cut it down with his flaming demon sword, reducing the projectile to ashes.

“Aww,” Lay protested. “I wanted to get the first hit in.”

He moved to draw the sword of the student beside him, likewise throwing it at Ydol. He then burst into a run, grabbing one demon sword after another to hurl at the waiting Demon Elder.

Demon swords chose their owners. Drawing all those swords was no mean feat.

“Hmph. Preoccupied on the battlefield, are we?”

Gaios, who had circled silently behind me, raised the Supreme Demon Sword Grajetian into the air.

“Better be good at dodging, fledgling!”

Grajetian came hurtling down with incredible momentum, the enormous blade landing directly on my head. The pressure of the swing bored a hole into the floor, sending dust swirling into the air.

“Wha—” he gulped.

The Supreme Demon Sword Grajetian had completely snapped from the impact with my skull.

“You aimed for the wrong spot, Gaios. My head is tough.”

“Tough? This isn’t just a matter of being tough. Grajetian has split mountains with a single strike... How...”

I held my demon sword ready in a low stance, and replied, “Did you think slicing through a mountain meant that you could slice through my skull?”

Taken aback by my bloodlust, Gaios flinched, backing swiftly away. But a moment later, he lost sight of me.

“He’s gone...” he breathed idly. “Where did he go?!”

“Stop making such a fuss. All I did was walk, Gaios.”

I slashed at his feet from behind, and he fell to his knees. Then, I grabbed the back of his head, which was now at the perfect height.

“Now, let’s see how much you remember.”

I cast Rivide and Eviy simultaneously, combing through the surface of his memories, but just as I’d suspected, there was no trace of Anos Voldigoad in Gaios’s mind.

When I focused my Eyes into his abyss, I found the two sources I was looking for. One belonged to Gaios, whose memory I’d now examined. The other most likely belonged to a follower of Avos Dilhevia, but I couldn’t read this demon’s memories without knowing their origin.

All of this had been within the realm of my expectations. I hadn’t been counting on finding a lead this way.

“Shall we continue?” I asked, releasing my hand and pointing my sword at his neck.

Gaios grimaced bitterly. “I...I surrender...”

At the declaration of the Demon Elder’s defeat, cheers and clamoring rose around the arena.

§ 6. Lay's Abilities

"I can't believe it... He overpowered Lord Gaios with no effort at all..."

"That was so one-sided, you can't even call it a match..."

"Could Anos actually be telling the truth? You know, about being the Demon —"

"Hey, don't go spouting nonsense! No matter how strong he may be, there's no way the Demon King of Tyranny would be a mixed-breed, much less a misfit!"

"Right. It's not strength or wisdom that matters, but the precious blood that flows through our veins. Don't forget your pride as royalty—your pride in carrying the founder's blood. This guy may be strong, but he's just a misfit. There's nothing precious about his strength."

It was somewhat comical hearing such senseless muttering in reaction to the strength of the founder himself, but perhaps this was all part of Avos Dilhevia's plan. What did he intend to achieve by seizing my position? There was no need to concern myself with small fry that were only after my power, but I still couldn't understand his purpose.

"Heh heh heh!"

At the sound of Ydol's laugh, I redirected my gaze.

"That's the last sword. It was a crafty tactic, but you've nothing left to throw."

At second glance, it seemed that all the swords that had been stabbed into the arena floor were gone. The only one remaining was the sword in Lay's hand, but it didn't stand a chance against Ydol's twin swords, which could cremate it in an instant.

A situation like this would normally be considered dire, but for some strange reason, it didn't feel like he could lose. It was time to see what he had up his sleeve.

“Well, I guess I’ll have to do things the normal way now,” Lay mumbled. Without pulling a single trick, he began to head straight for Ydol.

“Heh, so you’re finally ready to fight. Come—I’ll teach you the proper way to use a demon sword without tossing them about like throwing knives.”

Ydol and Lay faced one another. Another half step closer and they would be within striking range. Lay was at an overwhelming disadvantage one-on-one—yet he was the one to step carelessly forward.

“Such reckless movements,” Ydol commented.

The twin swords danced mercilessly. Each arm moved independently of the other—the fire sword aimed at Lay’s head, then one beat later, the ice sword aimed at his chest. Even if he managed to evade the fire sword, the ice sword would strike the moment he was thrown off-balance. Lay met the two lethal slashes head-on with the single demon sword in his right hand.

“There,” Lay mumbled.

Swords clashed together, clanging and screeching as blade met blade.

“Two.”

“Agh?!” Ydol exclaimed, his expression turning severe. Lay’s demon sword had deflected his own.

Not only did Lay possess the technique to deflect the near-simultaneous attack of twin swords with a single blade, but his demon sword was unscathed. It was inexplicable—any contact with Zeth and Ides should have destroyed it.

“Hragh!” Ydol cried, swinging his swords once more.

The clash once again resounded as Lay easily deflected the attack.

“Four,” he mumbled.

“What do you think you’re doing, kid?”

Sword continued to clash against sword—once, twice...

“Six.”

“Tch, in that case...!”

Ydol doubled the speed of his attacks—then doubled it once more. His hands were moving faster than the eye could see, releasing a flurry of strikes—yet Lay’s sword remained undamaged.

“Eighty-seven.”

“Curse you... How can you defend yourself with such a measly demon sword? What petty tricks are you using?!”

Clank, clink. There was no end to the metallic shrieks echoing throughout the arena.

“Now I see,” I said, nodding. “Lay, all those demon swords you threw at Ydol chipped his blades when he cut them down. Demon swords cannot activate their effects through defective areas of the blade, so you can safely make contact by striking there.”

Ydol frowned at my words. “That’s absurd... You’re telling me he’s aiming for the tiniest chips in my blades to deflect me?! That’s impossible...!”

Strictly speaking, Lay had aimed for the same few spots on each blade since he’d started throwing swords. He had controlled his throwing strength and angle flawlessly, wearing away at a tiny part of each blade over and over again, until the twin swords Zeth and Ides eventually chipped.

“Could you not reveal my techniques to my opponent? It puts me at a disadvantage,” Lay chimed in without a hint of concern.

“You can afford that much of a handicap,” I replied.

Ydol took a step back, sizing up the distance between them. “It seems I underestimated you for being a child. I shall now face you with all my strength...”

Magic circles appeared above both his hands. Flames rose from the Demon Sword Zeth, while the Demon Sword Ides frosted over.

“These are the true forms of Zeth and Ides. Prepare yourself!”

Ydol’s figure blurred. He had stepped within range of Lay in an instant, swinging the twin swords rapidly. His strikes exceeded two hundred a second—there was no escaping the flurry of flame and frost rushing at Lay.

“Haaah...” Lay exhaled. His sword glinted. His blade moved like a flash of light—knocking Ydol’s twin blades cleanly away.

“Four hundred and forty-two.”

“Wh-Why? It should be pointless to aim for a chip in the blade like this...”

Lay smiled coolly, making no move to answer, so it was I who took the initiative.

“The answer is simple: Lay’s demon sword isn’t touching yours. He’s deflecting you with the wind pressure from his swings.”

“It’s not as easy as it sounds,” Lay added, chuckling.

“He’s exchanging blows with my swords...using wind pressure?” A look of vexation crossed Ydol’s face, which twisted into an infuriated glare. “Curse you... Fine! Let’s see how long you can continue that tightrope act!”

Ydol’s swords glinted, only to be swept away by Lay once more.

“Your skills may be impressive,” he growled, continuing his assault, “but how about your stamina? I’m afraid I won’t tire for the next one hundred years—”

There, Ydol fell speechless. The fire and ice enshrouding the twin blades had scattered and dispersed. The two demon swords had snapped right through the middle, the broken tips spinning as they flew through the air.

Eventually, they landed, plunging into the ground.

“My twin swords...snapped!”

“Four hundred and forty-four. As calculated.”

Ah, so he had been counting the number of strikes it took for the twin swords to break.

“By the way,” Lay said casually. “When were you going to teach me how to use a demon sword?”

Instead of replying, Ydol cowered in fright. Belatedly realizing his defeat, he looked over at Gaio to seek his peer’s assistance.

“What... Just what are you two...?” Ydol mumbled, hanging his head. “Never in two thousand years have the Seven Demon Elders been treated like

children... This is unheard of.”

I watched as Lay walked over to me unconcerned.

“Lay, you went easy on him, didn’t you?”

“That’s not true.”

“Spare me the modesty. With your strength, you could have ended the match without ever crossing swords.”

Lay flashed me a refreshing smile. “But that wouldn’t be good practice.”

“Oh?”

“I wanted to see if I could break those swords without using any magic. I cheated a little at the end, so I still have a long way to go.”

Ha ha ha! Goodness, what a delight this man was, treating these “elders” as sword practice. How interesting. I’d certainly love to see the depths of his power.

“Face me with all you’ve got tomorrow,” I said seriously.

Lay’s smile did not falter. “I’ll think about it.”

“If you treat me as practice, you’ll end up dead.”

“I’d prefer not to die if possible.” His reply was as lighthearted as always.

“Then do as you wish,” I said, smirking. “I’ll make you change your mind later.”

Lay looked momentarily baffled, then relaxed into a chuckle. “You’re quite the sadist, aren’t you?” he asked.

“What are you saying? There’s no demon as kindhearted as I.”

“Then I’d appreciate it if you’d go easy on me.”

“Bwa ha! Don’t be ridiculous. Your body language says otherwise.”

The smile on Lay’s face didn’t seem to be one of objection. He wasn’t the aggressive type, but that didn’t mean he hated fighting. He wouldn’t have mastered the sword to this degree otherwise.

“You know, all that exercise has made me hungry,” he said.

“I’ve had enough of this lesson anyway. Shall we return to the classroom for a quick lunch break?”

“Are we allowed to do that?”

“It won’t be a problem if we do so secretly.”

“Got it. Secretly it is.”

Continuing our discussion, we made our way outside of the magic barrier, closely followed by the collective gaze of our classmates.

“Hey, what’s with this mundane atmosphere?” Sasha complained. “You two just beat up two Demon Elders! Don’t start talking about lunch like you’re going about your normal day...”

It *was* just another normal day, so I don’t know what Sasha was griping about.

§ 7. Skirmish

The next day.

Demon King Academy Delsgade.

The students of class two had gathered at the enchanted forest, ready for the forthcoming exam. In the distance, the bell rang, signaling the start of lessons, and Emilia addressed the class.

“The team exam between Team Lay and Team Anos will now commence,” she announced.

Lay walked towards me. “Did you sleep well last night?”

“Yes, like a baby.”

“That must have been nice. I couldn’t sleep at all.”

“I see. Were you reading a good book? Staying up late is bad for your health.”

“I completely agree. It was a struggle to get up this morning.” Lay yawned dramatically.

“H-Hey! Hold on just a minute!” Sasha interjected, ready to make a complaint.

“What’s wrong?”

“Don’t give me that! We’re about to go into a team exam! A team exam! What’s this lax air for? Do you two think we’re on a field trip?”

Good grief, it wasn’t as though we were going to war. Of course, it was theoretically possible to die if we were careless, but we weren’t exactly going on a killing spree.

“Sorry, my followers can be a little noisy,” I said, placing a hand on Sasha’s head to suggest she be quiet.

“G-Get off me... Don’t think you can silence me like this...” Despite her words, Sasha quieted obediently.

“Jealous?” Misha asked her from behind.

“Wh-What are you saying...?!”

“Because Anos is acting differently.”

I was acting differently?

“Oh, I see,” I said, catching on. “Sasha, are you jealous that I can have a peaceful conversation with Lay but not you?”

“D-Dumbass! There’s no way I’d be jealous of that!”

“Really?” I stared right at her, but she turned away in a huff.

“I’m not jealous...” she muttered to herself.

“Besides, you were the one who started the fight during the last team exam,” I pointed out.

Sasha glanced up and groaned.

“Sasha,” Misa interrupted, stepping away from a gathering of fan union members.

“What?!”

She flinched at the hostility in Sasha’s voice. “Um... How about we make a bet as well?”

“What? Why do I have to do that?”

“You know how Lord Anos made a bet with Lay? Why don’t we have a contest of strength, separate from the two of them?”

“I can’t believe this. The team exams are mock wars. In what world are wars won by arranging bets beforehand?” Sasha asked, shooting her down coldly.

Misa just grinned. “You seemed really fond of that photo I showed you the day before yesterday.”

“Wh-What? You’re wrong.” Sasha’s eyes darted about nervously.

“Heh heh heh... If you defeat me, I’ll give it to you.” Misa flashed what appeared to be a photograph from her breast pocket.

“I see,” Sasha responded reluctantly. “Is that all you wanted to say?”

“Yes. Let’s both do our best.”

With that, Misa returned to the crowd of girls.

“Ah, that’s right. You were the victor of yesterday’s match, weren’t you?” Lay asked me.

“That’s right. Have you got something for me?”

He smiled brightly. “How about a fun time in today’s team exam?”

I burst into laughter. Somehow, his offer sounded more difficult to accomplish than the violent threats I usually received. This offer seemed much more difficult to follow through with.

“Interesting. I’ll look forward to it.”

“What should we do about the camp positions?”

“You can choose first.”

“Then I’ll take the east, I guess,” Lay said, then he turned on his heel and called out to Misa’s group. “Let’s go. I may not be a very reliable leader, but please lend me your strength.”

Misa looked surprised at that.

“Something the matter?” Lay asked her.

“No, you’re just a little different from other royalty, saying that to white-uniforms and all.”

“Oh, I don’t keep up with that sort of thing. All that stuff about royalty and whatnot is too complicated for me,” Lay explained plainly. “Anyways, I sometimes wonder myself.”

“Wonder what?”

“If the founder really said that.”

Misa stared at Lay with a stunned expression.

“I wonder if that guy really said royalty is superior.”

“That guy...?”

“Ah, ignore me; I’m just thinking out loud. I’ve always had this strange feeling that the Demon King of Tyranny everyone speaks of is someone else, but

because I'm from the Cohort of Chaos, everyone gives me the cold shoulder when I talk about it. I'd appreciate it if you could keep this a secret."

Misa giggled. "I understand. By the way, Lay, do you have any interest in the Unitarian movement?"

She must have sensed there was a chance of persuading Lay, as she had suddenly begun canvassing him.

"Nope, not at all."

"I see. That's a shame. What about the fan union for Lord Anos?"

Team Lay continued chatting amicably as they headed towards the east camp. We also turned, starting for the west forest.

After some time, an owl flying overhead sent us a message through Leaks.

"The team exam between Team Lay and Team Anos will now begin. Defeat your enemies in a way the founder would be proud of!"

With the usual announcement, the team exam commenced.

"So...what's the plan?" Misha asked.

"I'll take on Misa and the remaining students," Sasha declared plainly.

Misha stared at her sister. "For the photo?"

"N-No, of course not! That girl seems to think she can take me on, so I'm going to show her a thing or two."

In spite of what she'd said about mock war, she seemed rather on board with the idea.

"A word, Sasha," I said before we began.

"What?"

"You may be outnumbered, but under my charge, you don't come running back with your tail between your legs."

She smirked. "Of course. Just watch—I'll beat them all up for you."

"Hmm. Then if you succeed, I shall reward you justly."

"What will you give me?"

“Anything you’d like. Better think of what that might be.”

At that, an idea seemed to occur to her, as a bashful expression appeared on her face.

“A-Anything...?” she asked.

“Yes.”

Sasha stepped closer. “By anything, do you really mean anything? Anything at all?”

“Sure. What is it you want?”

Her face flushed, and she looked away. “N-Nothing in particular. I’ll think about it...”

It certainly sounded like she had something in mind.

“Should I build a castle?” Misha asked.

“Yeah, we should probably have one.”

Misha nodded, clenching her left fist. Numerous ice crystals appeared from the Lotus Ice Ring, forming a magic circle that began to glitter.

“Ice castle,” she murmured, activating Iris.

The ground beneath my feet instantly froze over, transforming into a floor of ice. This was followed by the creation of ice walls, mirrors, statues, and an ice throne. The next moment, the floor beneath me began to rise, lifting me higher and higher into the air. Finally, the ceiling sealed overhead, completing the huge Demon King Castle.

We were now standing in the throne room of said castle.

“Since when have you been able to build a castle so fast?” Sasha asked her sister.

Misha tilted her head. “Is it because of the Lotus Ice Ring?”

“Well, that’s part of it,” I answered.

Sasha turned to me curiously. “Is there another reason?”

“Ask your source.”

Sasha glared at me unhappily, but I brushed off her gaze.

“Now, what to do... Shall we attack them before they’ve built their castle?”

“I can wait until they’re done,” Sasha replied confidently. “If I beat them up at the top of their game, they won’t be able to say it was unfair.”

She’d been rather competitive when it came to Misa ever since the other day. It was nice seeing them getting along so well.

“Then let’s find out what they’re up to.”

I activated my Magic Eyes and intercepted the opponent’s Leaks, just as I had last time. This time, though, I made sure to include Misha and Sasha, so that they could listen along.

“Oh, I think he’s listening now.”

“Huh? You can tell?”

Lay and Misa’s voices could be heard over the Leaks.

“Hey, Anos. You hearing this?” Lay asked.

So he’d noticed me. Misa and the other girls might have warned him in advance, but it was impressive nonetheless.

“I had some free time on my hands,” I responded. “How’s your castle coming along?”

“It’ll take a little longer.”

“Well, that’s boring.”

“Then to kill some time, how about we meet at the biggest waterfall in the valley?”

Oh?

“Just the two of us?”

“You’d prefer we not be interrupted, right?”

I knew he wasn’t the type to run and hide, but to think he’d be this bold. It was certainly an interesting choice, considering he was aware of my strength.

“I’ll be right there.”

“See you soon.”

The Leaks cut off. Their team must have ceased their casting.

“Well then,” I said, turning to my teammates. “I’m going to have some fun.”

“Be careful,” Misha said.

“You can play around all you want, but don’t settle this before I defeat Misa,” Sasha added.

The team exam would end when either side’s King was defeated.

“I’ll wait half an hour, but I won’t guarantee any longer than that. Better do your best,” I warned her.

With that said, I cast Gatom. My vision turned white, then cleared to reveal a waterfall cascading from a height of three hundred meters or so.

It seemed Lay couldn’t arrive so quickly, so I took a seat on a nearby boulder to wait.

Eventually, a huge Demon King Castle appeared in the forest to the east. It was considerably well-made—a sturdy build. I was casting my gaze over the workmanship of the castle when I heard the sound of footsteps on grass.

It was Lay.

“Hey, did I keep you waiting?” he asked.

“No, I just got here myself.”

Lay walked over to me, coming to a stop one step outside of sword range.

“Would it be tasteless to start fighting immediately?” he asked.

“I don’t mind either way. Did you have a more interesting suggestion?”

He grinned mischievously. “Do you really think your followers can win against the girls in the fan union?”

Hmm. So that’s what he wanted.

“Sounds like you have a trick up your sleeve,” I observed.

“That girl—Misa, I think it was—said she wanted to join your team as well. I figured it was fate, or something of the sort, so I lent her a little power.”

Interesting. So it'd be their team against ours in a skirmish between followers.

"Naturally, my subordinates will be the ones to win."

I drew a magic circle over the waterfall, casting Limnet over the water. The falling water became a huge screen, displaying the events at both our camps.

"Did you hear that, Sasha? Good news. We've decided to wait until your match with Misa is settled."

"Right. Thanks. Then I'd better finish things quickly."

Sasha was flying through the air with Fless, about to reach the fan union's castle. Attacking from the air would normally be an unfavorable move that exposed oneself, but that wasn't a problem with Sasha's strength.

"I've come as requested, Misa Ilirogue. Show yourself. Or would you rather I march into your castle?"

"He he he. Thank you very much, Sasha," Misa's voice replied. "As a token of my gratitude, allow me to show you something interesting."

The ground began to rumble, and a huge stone arm extended from the fan union's castle. This was followed by another arm, and then legs. Then, the castle slowly stood up, revealing its true form: a giant soldier the size of a mountain.

"You cast Guineth...on a Demon King Castle...?" Sasha murmured in disbelief.

Guineth allowed the caster to animate inanimate objects. The larger the object, the more difficult it was to control and the more magic it required.

The control of the castle was probably being split between members of the fan union. But even with all their magic pooled together and enhanced by the Shaman class, whose specialty was to enhance detection and control magic, they shouldn't have enough to manipulate such a large object.

"Did you supply them with your magic?" I asked.

Lay chuckled. "I'm not that good with magic, you see. Since I don't have much use for it, I tend to have far more than I need."

In that case, he was able to redirect the excess to the fan union using Gyze.

“Here I come, Sasha!” Misa yelled.

The giant soldier raised a ridiculously large sword and swung it at its waiting opponent.

“Ack... You...!”

The giant moved nimbly despite its imposing frame. The wind pressure generated by its swings prevented Sasha from flying freely, making it a struggle for her to avoid its attacks.

“Size isn’t the only thing that matters!” she cried, glaring at the giant with her Magic Eyes of Destruction.

Its stone walls began crumbling away, but the giant was just too big—Sasha couldn’t fit everything in her field of view. It would take more than a glare to destroy it.

“Shouldn’t you lend her a hand?” Lay suggested.

Sasha wasn’t only up against Misa, but a whole group supplied with Lay’s magic. There was no denying she was at a disadvantage, but— “Don’t underestimate my subordinate,” I said.

I called out to her through Leaks. “Hey, Sasha. Need a hand?”

“No. It doesn’t matter how outnumbered I am; no follower of the Demon King would need to borrow power for something like this.”

“Well said. Then use Jio Graze.”

Her reply came delayed, as if she hadn’t been expecting my suggestion. *“I can’t... I was barely able to do it with twenty people. I may be a Mage under Gyze, but I just don’t have enough power.”*

Those of the Mage class were granted enhanced attack magic and increased magic power. In return, their healing magic was weakened and physical abilities were decreased.

“You could borrow Misha’s power.”

“But with just the two of us...”

“You don’t believe me?”

After a beat of silence, Sasha replied. “*Fine. Misha, you ready?*” she called through Leaks, evading the massive sword by a hair’s breadth.

“*Establishing three-dimensional magic circle,*” came Misha’s reply. “*Setting caster to Sasha.*”

Far from the giant soldier, a magic circle with glittering ice crystals was drawn at the Demon King Castle at the west camp. Once complete, the huge circle transformed the entire front of the castle into a gigantic cannon.

The girls’ magic linked together through Gyze, becoming one.

Sasha followed the movements of the swinging sword closely and held out her hand to take aim. “Here goes! *Jio Graze!*”

A new magic circle appeared before the cannon of the ice castle, from which a jet-black sun emerged. The immense mass of magic left a trail of light as it soared straight for the giant.

“M-Misa! Dodge it!” a girl from the fan union shouted.

“I...I can’t. We’re too big to move—”

The giant soldier was engulfed by the black sun. The castle rattled, the arms fell off, the legs collapsed, and the outer walls peeled away.

“A-Awaaaaaah!” echoed the fan union’s scream.

“L-Lord Anos’s follower destroyed our giant in a single blow... She’s too stroooooong!”

“H-Hey! I just realized something terrific!”

“Now? When we’re in the middle of dying?!”

“If we die here, we would have been killed at Lord Anos’s order! It’d be an indirect killing, wouldn’t it?!”

“Oh, yes! Lord Anos can kill me *any* day!”

With a booming crash, the giant soldier crumbled to the earth.

§ 8. Spirit Magic

“It’s stronger than the Jio Graze I cast last time... No matter how much magic I borrowed from Misha, there was still just the two of us...” Sasha mumbled in amazement, gazing down at the fallen giant.

“I’m shocked...” Misha said quietly, sharing her sister’s sentiments from within the ice castle.

“Say, Anos, did you do something?” Sasha asked me over Leaks.

“Like I said, ask your source.”

“I don’t get what you mean by that... Oh!” Sasha gasped in realization.

“Dino Jixes?” Misha asked.

“That’s right.”

Sasha and Misha had once been the same person. When Dino Jixes had been cast on Sasha, her body and soul had split into two, and Misha had been born. The two were supposed to return to their original state on their fifteenth birthday—with magic increased several tenfold thanks to the effects of the spell.

But by sending the current Misha and Sasha’s sources into the past and making them fuse with their sources there, they had been able to become two fully formed people from the very beginning.

So what had happened, exactly? Through the use of Rivide and Ingdu, the Dino Jixes cast on Sasha and Misha had instead been completed fifteen years ago. Following the laws of fusion magic, the union had amplified their power dramatically. The result hadn’t been perfect—the sources they’d fused with were newly born rather than fully grown—but they still had far more power than before.

Sasha and Misha hadn’t noticed until now, but I had been restricting their power in order to successfully use Ingdu. Otherwise, the difference in their

younger selves' power before and after their current selves had used Rivide would have created a paradox. The past couldn't be altered in such a state. However, after Ingdu had been completed, that limit could be removed. That was why Misha was now able to use Iris to a higher degree.

"Then say so earlier! I nearly went too far and killed them." Sasha landed in the forest and looked around the area. "Hey," she said aloud. "If you guys are still alive, say something. I'll come save you."

No one replied. Well, I could still sense their magic power, so at least they weren't dead.

"So, how does it feel to see your castle destroyed?" I asked, looking away from Limnet to address Lay.

"It's a shame, but I guess it's my loss..."—he smiled briskly—"is what your follower probably thinks I'm feeling."

Just then, Sasha's voice could be heard over Limnet. "Huh? Ugh, why does it have to rain now, of all times?"

Rain? There wasn't a cloud in the sky overhead.

"Be careful," Misha warned.

"What's wrong?"

"It's clear over here. The rain's only falling where you are."

Sasha's expression changed. The light drizzle had already turned into a downpour, making it near impossible for her to see her surroundings. That said, the rain only affected her vision, not her Eyes.

"What is this? This rain isn't normal... Misha?"

"Every drop has the same magic as Misa. I can't tell where she is..."

Sasha's expression stiffened. "This magic... It's not a lost spell, but I've never heard of such a thing..."

Hmm. Spirit magic, huh? This was the spell the Great Water Spirit Lignon had used on us in Ahalthern. Misa was half spirit, so she might have some connection to Lignon.

The magic used by spirits was unique—their very existences were like magic. They hadn't gotten along with demons very well from the beginning, but the thousand years without contact between the races must have completely killed off their tales of that. Well, at least they had a chance of being mentioned in some books somewhere, unlike the true Demon King of Tyranny.

If neither Sasha nor Misha knew anything about spirit magic, then Misa must have hidden her power until today. The fact she was using it here was proof of her desire to win by any means necessary. Though the twins were unfamiliar with the magic, they would be able to deal with it once they figured out how it worked. That meant that this was Misa's one and only chance to defeat Sasha.

Sasha was well aware of this herself.

"Fine. I'll let you deal the first blow. But you'd best be prepared—if you can't finish me off in one go, it'll be your defeat."

Sasha cast layers of anti-magic on herself, followed by a magic barrier. Her magic power, which had already been significantly increased through Dino Jixes, was enhanced even further through her Mage class. It would be a challenge for Misa to break through those wards, even with the assistance of the fan union.

"Chaaarge!"

Just then, the fan union girls emerged from the pouring rain and began swarming Sasha in their numbers.

There were eight of them in total, all with spears in their hands. They must have known their magic had no chance of breaking through Sasha's defenses.

The girls surrounded her on all sides and thrust their spears forward.

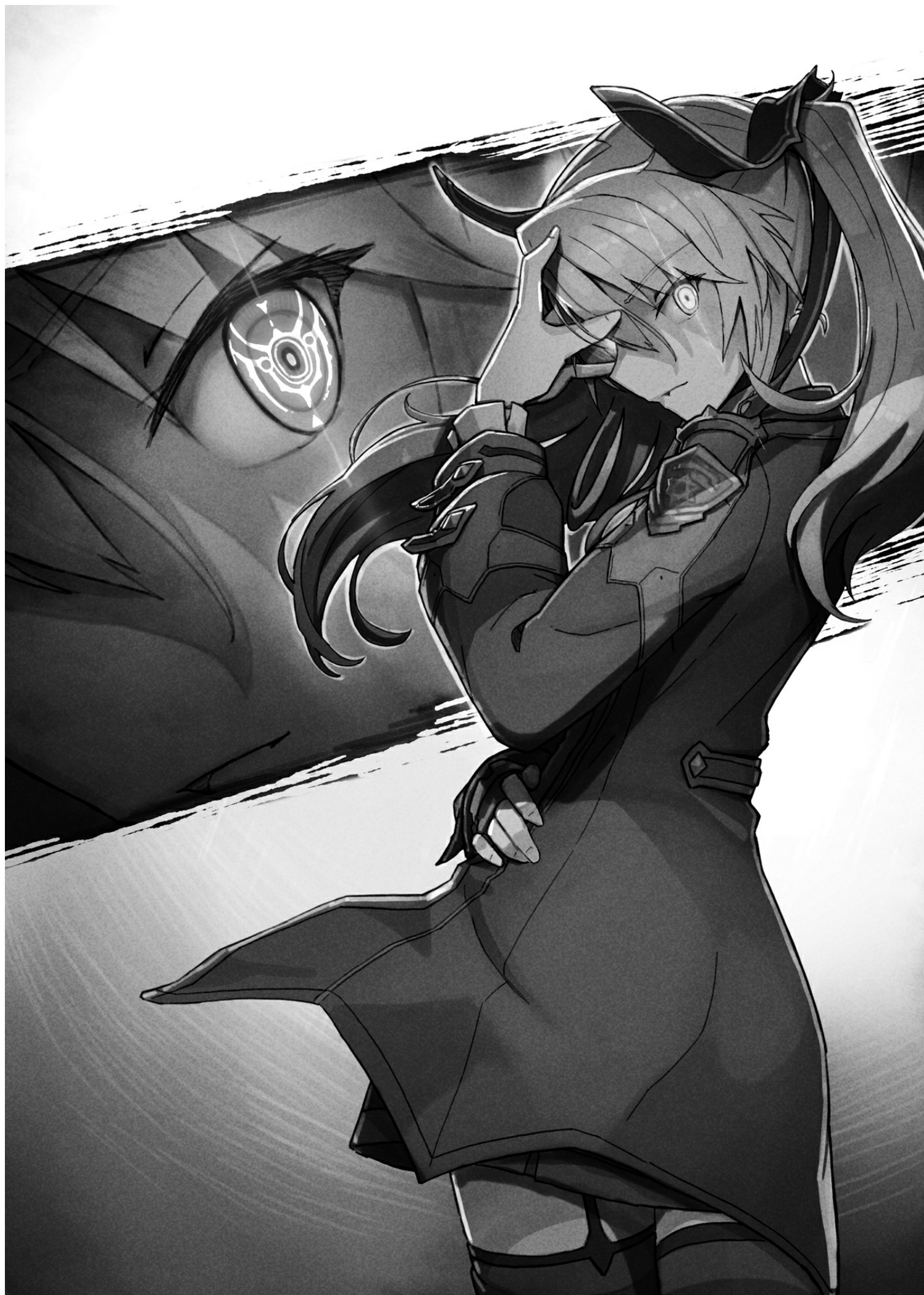
"Finally showing yourselves?"

The fan union's spears were deflected by her barrier, failing to leave a single scratch on her. Sasha glanced at the eight of them with her Eyes of Destruction.

"Go to sleep."

Caught off guard, the girls staggered, collapsing where they stood.

"I held back, so you'll all wake up in a day or so."



“It’s not...over yet...”

Sasha’s eyes widened at the voice. A single fan union girl, who should have been completely unconscious, was crawling across the ground.

“I’m going to...join Lord Anos’s team...”

An opponent with far inferior power was resisting her Eyes by sheer force of will.

That was enough to distract Sasha.

The raindrops falling from the sky formed the shape of a person—right above Sasha’s head. It was Misa, with a pure-white demon sword raised in the air.

“I’ve got you now, Sasha!”

“No, you haven’t.”

Sasha quickly shifted her anti-magic and barrier, deploying them overhead. Regardless, Misa’s sword plummeted down.

“Hiyaaah!”

The white blade sliced through Sasha’s defenses, striking her in the abdomen. Fresh blood gushed from her body as she fell.

“Hah... Hah...”

Panting heavily, Misa landed on the ground—the attack had used up all of her magic power.

“Hmm, I see,” I said, looking over at Lay. “That’s your demon sword, isn’t it?”

Sasha may have been caught by surprise, but Misa still didn’t have the strength to overpower her defenses alone.

“Demon swords choose their owners, but I can temporarily lend mine to her by sharing my magic through our Gyze connection.”

“Which normally isn’t possible.”

“Well, yes.”

If I recalled correctly, he was also able to use spirit swords and divine swords. Still, if he could subjugate a demon sword to the extent that it could be lent to

others, then he was quite extraordinary when it came to swords.

He reminded me a little of Shin.

“You should probably help heal her wounds, don’t you think? A Mage won’t be able to heal an injury from a sword like that.”

I scoffed at Lay’s suggestion. “I told you already: don’t underestimate my followers.”

The waterfall screen showed Sasha unmoving on the ground—when her body was suddenly engulfed in gold flames. Misa whipped around in shock, backing away reflexively.

“I’m surprised,” came Sasha’s voice. “I didn’t think you could use a demon sword so well.” She rose, leaping into the air. The gold flames around her materialized over her shoulders, transforming into the Phoenix Mantle. Whoever wore this mantle received the blessing of immortality and would recover from any wound as long as their magic remained.

“Next time, I’ll cut through that robe as well...” Misa said, holding her demon sword at the ready. Even Sasha had learned to be wary of it.

“I’ll help,” Misha’s voice called out. *“I can feel Lay’s power from that sword. Two against one isn’t fair.”*

“I appreciate the offer, Misha, but I’ll settle this before you arrive.”

If they fired Jio Graze from our castle right now, Sasha would get caught in the blast; not to mention that Misa was unlikely to wait for Misha to run all the way there. Sasha must have had the same thought—that is, until a magic circle appeared before her, from which a girl with platinum-blond hair emerged.

It was Misha.

“Misha... Was that Gatom?” Sasha asked, shocked.

“I’ve seen it so many times now, I thought I could do it myself.”

Hmm. I certainly had demonstrated it many times, but I hadn’t thought that enough for her to imitate the spell so flawlessly. Dino Jixes may have played a part, but she truly had superb Magic Eyes.

“Fine. Tell me the details after we take her down.”

“Okay.”

Misha and Sasha stood side by side, as Sasha shot Misa a piercing look.

“You two are amazing...but I can’t afford to lose.”

Misa sent all her remaining magic into the demon sword. But no matter how much assistance Lay provided, the sword wasn’t hers to control. She wouldn’t be able to hold out in a drawn-out battle.

“Prepare yourselves!” she shouted, bursting into a run.

“Sasha...”

“I know.”

Sasha drew a magic circle and cast Griad. Enhanced by the Phoenix Mantle, the normally black flames of Griad burned gold as they rushed straight for Misa.

“Haaah!” Misa cried as the pure-white sword sliced through the spell. The gold flames vanished in an instant.

“I knew it,” Sasha declared.

“A demon sword that cuts spell formulae,” her sister added.

At the core of every spell was a spell formula that allowed it to function. A magic blueprint, as it were. The pure-white demon sword before them was slipping past the magic and nullifying it by slicing through the spell formula directly.

“So you figured it out... Either way, neither magic nor anti-magic will work on this sword. Besides—” Misa’s body melted into the rain and vanished. Her spirit magic allowed her to become one with the raindrops themselves.

“Misha.”

“Yup.”

The twins stood with their backs to one another and linked hands. They didn’t know where Misa would reappear, and her sword was capable of rendering all their defenses useless, but despite that—

Sasha giggled.

“What is it?”

“I never imagined I’d see a day like this.”

It was just a regular exam, during a regular lesson. There was nothing unusual about two sisters joining forces to fight. But for these sisters, this was a dear miracle that they once could have only dreamed of.

“Let’s show her the secret art of the Necron family.”

“Yeah.” Misha smiled faintly. Between the two of them, they could cover their entire surroundings.

“Here goes!”

Suddenly, the raindrops beside them transformed back into Misa. She was three steps outside of sword reach. Sasha cast a magic circle to intercept her, but—

“It’s not there,” Misha murmured. It was hard to tell in the downpour, but Misa wasn’t holding the demon sword. She was merely pretending to swing.

Sasha looked upwards and gasped. The raindrops overhead had transformed into the pure-white sword, which was hurtling rapidly downwards.

They wouldn’t be able to evade it at this distance—or so Misa probably thought. However, right as the blade was about to make contact, the two sisters disappeared. The falling sword cut through the sky and pierced the ground beside them.

“Nice try.”

Having evaded the demon sword with Misha’s Gatom, the twins linked hands, holding their free palms out at Misa. A magic circle appeared there, and their voices called out in unison:

“Gresde.”

“Schade.”

Then came their merged attack.

“Je Grade!”

The secret art of the Necron family, fusion magic, had combined the gold flames of Gresde and the silver icicles of Schade to form a single magic wave of fire and ice that was surging straight towards Misa.

Misa yanked the demon sword out of the ground and prepared to defend against Je Grade.

“Haaah...!”

Magic collided with the demon sword. Je Grade’s force was reduced, but it wasn’t completely neutralized. The use of fusion magic had made the magic circle so complex, there were now several layers of formula overlapping each other. Even if Misa cut through the surface layer of the formula, Je Grade would merely revert into the original two spells. She didn’t have the skill to slice through every layer.

“Awaaaaaah!”

Swept up by the wave of fire and ice, Misa flew back. Upon landing, she rolled across the ground but made no move to get up—she had lost consciousness. The effect of her spirit magic ended, and the rain dispersed. Light shone through the clouds.

“I always practiced alone...so I’m glad our first try together was so in sync.”

Misha smiled. “I’m the same as you, remember?”

Sasha returned the smile happily. The two of them understood one another more than anyone else. They could synchronize the wavelengths of their magic with ease—they had originally been one, after all.

“And I’m the same as you,” Sasha said, holding up her hand. Misha tapped her palm against it in a gentle high five.

§ 9. Sword Fight of Legends

The sideshow had concluded. Misa and the fan union were no longer able to fight.

I turned my gaze to Lay, who was muttering to himself.

“Je Grade, huh? I wonder if I could cut it?”

“If you win, I’ll allow you a chance to try.”

I had chosen my words to provoke him, but he responded with a cool smile.

“Don’t you need to retrieve your sword from Misa?” I asked.

“Naw, getting there and back would take too long. Besides, I’ll be fine without Initio. I have another sword,” Lay replied, gesturing to the sword at his waist. From what I could see, the weapon had no magic to speak of. It was just a plain iron sword.

“You wish to pit that dull blade against me? I can wait for you to fetch the other, if you’d like.”

“I’d appreciate that and all, but are you telling the truth?”

“About what?”

Lay drew his sword from its sheath. “Your face says you’re raring to go.”

Well, he’d got me there. This man could see straight through me.

“I’m fine using this.”

It didn’t sound like a bluff, nor did it seem as though he were plotting something. Things were getting even more interesting.

“Then I’ll return the favor,” I said, picking up a suitably sized branch off the ground. “I shall fight using only a sword.”

“I know you’re strong, Anos, but you should probably use a normal sword.”

“Why? Will you slice me and my branch in two?”

Lay simply smiled, neither confirming nor denying his intentions.

“Just try me,” I said.

I took a step forward, closing the distance between us. In an instant, his hand vanished and was replaced with the flash of an iron sword.

“Hyah!”

“Too weak.”

I swung my branch down with unrestrained force. It collided with Lay’s sword, knocking him away. He bounced across the ground with a resounding thud.

“What’s wrong? Did you think it would be easy to cut through my tree branch?” I called to the fallen Lay. The branch, reinforced with my magic, was stronger than steel.

“Yeah...” Lay mumbled, getting back to his feet as though nothing had happened. “I should have known better. It’s my first time losing a hit to someone with an inferior weapon.”

“Yet you look rather pleased about it.”

“Really? I’m trembling in fear, though.”

“Liar. Your mouth is twitching.”

Lay chuckled, then made his move. He sped forward, closing the gap between us with steps devoid of all excessive movement. Then, as if by magic, he appeared before me.

“Hah!” he cried.

Lightning flashed.

“Hmm. Nice try.”

I countered Lay’s skilled strike with brute strength. Sword met branch, sending Lay flying back once more.

“Was that the best you can do?” I called.

Lay rose easily to his feet. “I’m beat. Pretty sure I’ve surpassed my limits already...”

There was no panic in his voice, only pure enjoyment. For some reason or another, I understood his mindset.

“Can I give it another try?” he asked, holding his sword at the ready. The gesture was so natural, the sword looked to be an extension of his arm.

“You can try as many times as you wish.”

Lay inhaled and held his breath.

As he braced his legs, his sword—no, his whole body became a flash of light. He stepped forward at a speed I could barely follow with my Magic Eyes, swinging his accelerating blade.

“Hmm. What impressive speed.”

Raising my speed to match his, I swung my branch to sweep aside his blade. The two weapons struck one another, creaking in their struggle to overpower their adversary. Lay, who had been knocked back by every other hit until now, was this time bearing my blow.

“Superb.”

I doubled my strength and sent him and his sword flying back. This time, however, he was able to regain his balance.

“Impressive. That last hit was pretty good too.”

My second strike had been stronger than the first, and my third stronger than the second. Despite this, Lay was getting better at countering my attacks. He wasn't hiding his strength—he couldn't afford to while wielding a simple iron sword. Nor had it sounded as if he'd been lying when he had said he'd surpassed his limits. In other words, Lay was improving at a formidable rate right in the midst of our battle.

“I feel like I'm on the verge of remembering...”

“Remembering what?” I asked.

“How to handle a sword.” Lay stepped forward once more. But unlike before, he wasn't moving so rapidly. I could clearly follow him with my eyes; however, I sensed an unfamiliar bloodlust. “Haaaah...!”

“Too slow.”

I struck his sword with my branch in an attempt to knock him back. Weapons clashed, screeching as his sword took the brunt of my strength, successfully parrying me to the side.

My single blow carried enough strength to destroy an entire castle, but Lay had managed to redirect the force with technique alone. Hmm. His rapid adaptation to my attacks was most interesting.

“You’re tough; I’ll admit.”

Of course, he wasn’t able to block every blow. For a brief moment, Lay staggered, and I made the most of the opening.

“Allow me to reward you.”

“Hah!” Lay succeeded in parrying once more, the collision echoing loudly. This time, he kept his balance. “I’ll split that branch of yours next time,” he promised me through a grin.

“Interesting. Then I’ll snap that sword of yours.”

Accompanied by rumbling explosions most uncharacteristic of a sword fight, Lay and I slashed at one another. I increased my strength with every hit, but Lay showed formidable growth, exceeding new limits with every strike.

His swordsmanship was fierce; his innate ability was frightening. Perhaps the match would be settled instantly if I increased my strength past his capacity to grow, but I wanted to see just how far he could go.

“Come on, step into my domain. I won’t allow you to give up midway.”

“Your high expectations of me are a little troubling.”

Over the next ten to twenty exchanges, my swings approached the level of those of the Mythical Age. The earth trembled with every strike, and when an impact was deflected, trees were blasted away. We were the eye of the storm, obliterating everything in the vicinity.

“A-Awaaaaah!” voices screamed over Leaks.

“What is this?! A natural disaster?!”

“H-Hey, Anos, what are you doing?!” Sasha bellowed. *“You blew away the whole damn mountain!”*

“The river dried up,” Misha added.

“Th-The earthquake isn’t stopping...!”

“Oh, we’re just having a somewhat intense sword fight,” I admitted, replying to the ongoing pandemonium.

“Sorry. Can you guys hold on a little longer?”

Lay and I crossed swords once more. The shock wave of sword meeting sword uprooted the surrounding vegetation, turning the area into a wasteland.

However, the soil of the enchanted forest was teeming with magic power. No matter to what extent we rampaged through it, everything would be restored overnight. In other words, we could unleash our attacks to the fullest of our capabilities.

“You look like you’re having fun, Anos.”

“I am indeed. It’s been a while since I’ve been able to go all out against an opponent. It seems if I don’t get a little exercise every so often, frustration accumulates.”

Another clash, and the tornado-like shock wave dispersed all the clouds in the sky.

“You don’t seem too displeased yourself.”

“It’s my first time crossing swords with someone for this long.”

With this much innate talent for sword fighting, he would catch up to any opponent’s ability within a few exchanges of blows—and surpass them.

“You seem to have a fondness for swords,” I observed.

“It’s my only redeeming feature.”

Lay’s talent had probably prevented him from facing any worthwhile opponents until now. There’s nothing more boring than being the best.

“I can understand how you feel.”

“For some reason, I can understand how you feel as well.”

Hmm. What was this feeling? Being able to cross swords with all my strength seemed to have lit a fire in my chest. Never before had I experienced such a thing. Was it because we lived in an era where we no longer had to fight for our lives?

“But I think it’s about time we called it a day.”

He parried my branch with excellent skill while pointing the tip of his blade at my throat.

“Hah!”

With that, he thrust forward with all his might—an attack he hadn’t displayed before now. The moment I tried to brush the blade aside, it swerved and pierced my branch down the middle. Whether I pushed or pulled, the branch was doomed to break.

“Now’s my chance...!”

His sword swerved again in an attempt to cut through the branch. I waited until the last moment and thrust my weapon upwards to cut through his blade.

Following one sharp crack, the tip of the sword went soaring through the air—as half my branch fell to the floor.

I immediately pointed the remaining half at my opponent’s head. “Hmm. Just as you said, you managed to break my weapon. I wasn’t expecting that.”

“But it’s my defeat. Not only did you snap my sword with a tree branch, but you made your victory clear.” Lay dropped his broken sword and lifted his hands in surrender. “Can I say something strange?”

“I’ll allow it.”

“While we were crossing swords, I had this feeling. I don’t know why, but I feel like we’ve met before, even though that shouldn’t be possible.”

“Perhaps we met two thousand years ago. I knew a man very similar to you.”

Lay looked at me curiously.

“Lay,” I said seriously, “would you believe me if I told you I’m the Demon King

of Tyranny?”

“I’m not sure, but I wouldn’t be surprised if it were true. Especially with all that strength of yours.”

There was no way for me to ascertain someone’s identity before their reincarnation, but I felt as though I knew Lay well.

“So, my liege, have I lost my chance at joining your team?” Lay asked.

Well, he had gone through all that trouble of reincarnating into this era. There was no need to remain caught up in the past.

“It’s Anos.”

“Hm?”

“It won’t do to have the man who crossed swords with me as an equal address me so formally.” I offered him my right hand, just as he had done back in the classroom.

“Well then, Anos”—Lay took my hand and shook it firmly—“I’m looking forward to winning next time.”

“Next time, you won’t even snap my sword.”

He grinned at my words, enticing me into grinning along.

Contrasting our cheery moods, the enchanted forest was a tragic sight to behold. As if decimated by a huge tornado, only a desolate wasteland remained.

§ 10. The Demon King...Naked

I later awoke to the chime of the bell.

“And that concludes lessons for today. Make sure you all arrive bright and early tomorrow.”

Emilia left the classroom as the students prepared to go home. Lay, who was leaning back in the seat in front of me, turned around to face me.

“Wanna go grab a bite?” he asked.

“You’re always hungry.”

“This body’s just energy inefficient.”

I pulled out my chair and stood up. “How about you join us at my place? We’ll be celebrating my victory in the team exam. Mom’s cooking is the very finest.”

“Sounds like a plan. I’d love to go.”

Lay sat up, then rose from his seat.

Beside me, Sasha looked quizzical. “Say, you two were in a ruthless battle to the death this morning, so what’s with the peaceful attitude? And isn’t it humiliating to be invited to the celebration of your own defeat?”

Lay and I exchanged looks.

“Is that true?” I asked.

“It’s hard to feel vexed after such an utter loss,” he said.

“So you say. Is it not the case that you don’t feel vexed because you intend on winning next time?”

Lay grinned, giving himself away. He was a truly comical man.

“Don’t tell me you believe our spat was enough to determine my ability.”

“I’ve never lost to the same foe twice.”

“I wouldn’t even lose once.” I looked down on him smugly, but his only

response was his signature refreshing smile.

“How can you two invite each other to parties when you’re always so competitive? I just don’t get it,” Sasha grumbled incredulously.

“What’s not to get?” I inquired.

“Maybe girls perceive friendship differently,” Lay suggested.

“Oh, perhaps.”

We laughed in agreement. Even without putting them into words, we had a vague idea of one another’s thoughts. It was similar to master-servant relationships of the Mythical Age, except it was much more comfortable being on equal footing.

Was this what they called a bromance? I can’t say I opposed the sensation.

“Jealous?” Misha asked her sister.

“I’ve told you, you’ve got it all wrong! Why do you always jump to stuff like that?”

Misha looked thoughtful. “Was it the wrong thing to say?”

“Don’t mind her. You can say what you want,” I assured her.

“H-Hey! That was a question directed to me, not you!”

Hmm. What was Sasha so worked up for now?

“I speak my mind as I please,” I told her.

Sasha glared at me, but I brushed her off lightly. “Let’s get going. A certain someone has hunger written all over his face.”

“If you’re talking about me,” Lay chimed in, “then I can still hold on for another ten seconds or so.”

“So you’re at your limit already.”

We both burst into laughter.

“Why do these two always end up laughing by themselves...” Sasha muttered.

Misha nodded. “They really do get along...”

“I’ll teleport us,” I said, holding out my hand. Sasha placed hers on top, and Misha took her sister’s free hand. I turned to look at Lay.

“Ah, could you wait just a moment?” he asked as if remembering something. “Misa,” he then called to a student on her way out of the room.

She turned around and walked over. “Is something wrong?”

“We’re about to hold a victory party at Anos’s house. Would you like to come along?”

“Huh? Um, I appreciate the invitation, but wouldn’t you prefer it to be just your team?”

Lay turned to me with a meaningful look.

What a compassionate man. Or did he have an interest in Misa? Well, all right then.

“What are you saying? You’re one of my followers already,” I said.

“Huh?! B-But I lost to Sasha and Misha...even though I borrowed Lay’s power...”

“You may have lost the match, but you showed great promise. Demons are unable to use spirit magic—and the spirit magic you used was the same as that of the Great Water Spirit Lignon.”

“Lignon?”

“Have you heard of her?”

Misa shook her head. If I recalled correctly, her mother was no longer in this world—it wouldn’t be strange if she knew nothing about spirits.

“She was the protector of the Forest of the Great Spirits during the Mythical Age. You most likely have some kind of connection to her, as a spirit’s magic is deeply linked to their existence.”

Misa listened to my words earnestly. She must have had quite the interest in her late mother.

“It’d be very entertaining if you learned to harness your true power as a spirit.”

Of course, there had been no half spirits in the Mythical Age, so there was no telling how much spirit power she possessed.

“Then...thank you,” Misa said hesitantly, “for letting me into your team. Um...”

“What is it?”

“What about the other girls in the Anos Fan Union...?”

My reply was immediate. “It’s just you for now. It’d get noisy if they joined the team.”

“Heh heh... Right...” Misa looked rather downcast.

“What’s wrong? Feeling guilty that you’re joining alone?”

“I suppose you could call it that...or you could call it a fear of being stabbed in the back, ha ha ha...”

Hmm. Perhaps those girls were harder to read than I’d thought.

“B-But that’s my problem, not yours. Don’t worry about it, Lord Anos.”

“I won’t.”

“Wow. That was cold,” Sasha commented.

“Oh! Speaking of which, Sasha...” Misa waved Sasha over to her.

Sasha shuffled closer. “What?”

“Heh heh. I lost our match, so...” She took out a magic photocard and offered it to Sasha.

Sasha stared at it closely before speaking. “I suppose I can take it as my spoil of war. Just in case, you know...”

“What’s the photo of?”

“Eeeek!”

Startled by Misha popping up beside her, Sasha dropped the photocard.

“Good grief. What’s all this fuss about?” I asked, picking up the fallen photo.

“N-No! You can’t look at that!”

“What are you wailing for? It’s just a picture.”

I flipped it over to reveal a boy with black hair and dark eyes. It was me, half-naked. The shot had been captured during a brief moment in class when we’d had to change with magic.

“...Eek.” Sasha blushed, shrinking back.

“Was this meant to be a sneak shot? Anos noticed you in this,” Lay commented over my shoulder.

“Of course I noticed. They’ve taken a number of pictures up till now, but they weren’t causing any harm, so I left them to it.”

I held the photo out to Sasha. “This is quite cute of you, though. Did you want to look upon me at all times?”

Sasha raised her head and glared at me furiously. Her cheeks were crimson, and her destructive Eyes were blazing.

“D-Don’t go getting so full of yourself! I just like naked men, okay?! Your body just so happens to be my type. I’m only after your body!”

Hmm. Was that so? Even I was at a loss for words.

The classroom had fallen silent. Everyone was mildly disturbed.

“I also like Anos’s naked body,” Misha chimed in, as if trying to support her sister.

“Misha, you don’t have to fall to Sasha’s level of buffoonery.”

Misha shook her head. “Anos’s body is a work of art. I like it,” she stated, staring into my eyes.

Hmm. How commendable of her. Perhaps I shouldn’t embarrass my subordinates too much, though.

“I never thought my nudity would be this alluring. How sinful of me.” I chuckled. “Fine. I have the magnanimity to grant my follower’s wishes. If you want to see my body so badly, Sasha, then I’ll show you—I’ll grant you a look at my naked body in person!”

“Whu...? B-By in person, do you mean...? U-Um...!” Sasha was too flustered to

form a sentence.

“What? You’re after my body, are you not? I shall grant you this reward for today’s work.”

“R-Right... You mentioned that...”

“What’s the matter? Do you not want it?”

Sasha averted her gaze, staring at the ground for a lengthy moment. “I do...” she mumbled quietly.

“All right. Then”—I clenched my fists. The force of my bulging muscles caused my upper uniform to burst, sending shreds of fabric flying—“look all you want!”

“Eek! Why are you stripping here?! You idiot!” Sasha squealed, finally finding her voice.

Acting the buffoon from time to time didn’t seem like a bad idea after all.

§ 11. Unreasonable

The world turned white, and after a brief moment, we were standing before the familiar blacksmith and appraisal shop, the Wind of the Sun. As I opened the door, the doorbell rang, causing mom to look our way.

“Welcome home, Anos dear!” she cried, leaping at me happily. “How did the exam go?”

“I won.”

Mom beamed, pulling me close to hug my head tightly to her chest. “Oh, I knew it! My little Anos is such a genius! One day, when you’re all grown up, you’ll make a fine demon lord. I’ll be right at home in the wonderful town you’ll create—gosh, I’m looking forward to it already!”

“You know about demon lords, mom?”

“Of course. It’s my precious child’s dream to become one, after all! I’ve done all the research a mother should. A demon lord works in governing the regions of Dilhade, right? I went to the nearest castle and asked them loads of questions. I even got a brief audience with Demon Lord Elio Ludwell!”

Ah, so she thought I was attending the Demon King Academy to become a demon lord. I hadn’t expected her to go so far as to research the position just for me, though—she had even met one in person. Was this what it meant to be a parent? Or was mom just really proactive?

I wasn’t particularly interested in becoming a demon lord, but given the situation with Avos Dilhevia, I’d have to prove my identity as the Demon King of Tyranny eventually. With that in mind, she was correct for the most part.

“Incidentally, that demon lord you met—Ludwell, was it? The name sounds familiar.”

“Yup! Lord Elio is the father of your teacher, Ms. Emilia.”

Ah, that was it. Ludwell was Emilia’s last name. Was this why she was always

so vocal about prejudice against royalty?

“What did you talk about when you saw him?”

“Oh, it was just an opportunity to listen to him speak before a big crowd. I just went to look around. Only important people were allowed to speak to him.”

Hmm. That made sense. If a demon lord had to listen to the woes of every citizen that visited, he would never get any work done.

“That aside, I’ve brought along even more people today. Is that okay, mom?”

“Huh...?” Mom fell silent, then peered behind me fearfully. “A-Anos... Don’t tell me...your third bride...is a BOY?!” Having seen Lay’s face, mom yelped in surprise. “I’m right, aren’t I? That’s a boys’ uniform!”

“That’s right. My name is Lay Grandsley, ma’am. I transferred just yesterday. Your son’s been treating me very well.”

Mom’s face lit up. “Oh, thank goodness! He only ever brought girls home, so I was worried he wasn’t getting along with boys. But I should have known! My Anos isn’t the type to go seducing girls left and right!”

Were you really worried about such things, mother?

“Rest assured, mom. I’ve found that I prefer the company of men. I just wasn’t aware of that until today.”

Two thousand years ago, I couldn’t afford to care about the differences between genders, but I now knew that men were easier to understand. Of course, it depended on the person, but I got along with Lay oddly well.

“You prefer...men?” mom muttered blankly, then gasped. “A-Anos is... Anos is...” She swayed on her feet, stumbling backwards before yelling, “Wh-What should I do?! My little Anos CAME OUT TO ME!”

It seemed a switch had been flipped in her head.

“Is something wrong?” I asked, mildly concerned.

“Huh? O-Oh, no, there’s nothing wrong at all! My baby is perfectly normal!”

“Is that so? Well, I suppose everything until now had felt a little strange. So this is what it means to be normal...”

People around me had always distinguished between male and female. Now I could finally understand what they meant.

“Everything has been strange? I see... Don’t worry, though! It’s a completely normal thing, yup! There’s nothing wrong with liking boys—nothing at all! B-But...could you give me just a moment?”

Mom snatched Misha and Sasha and ushered them to a corner of the room. “D-Did you two know?” she whispered frantically.

Sasha looked at her with a cool expression. “Can you maybe calm down a bit first?”

“R-Right, of course. As a mother, I cannot be panicking at a time like this. Anos mustered the courage to come out to me, so I have to respond to him properly!”



Sasha's face lost all expression. Misha had little expression to begin with, but she looked even less animated than usual.

"He said he didn't know until today, so he's been worried this whole time. He must have feared he was different from others—maybe that's why he tried to rush into an engagement. And when things didn't feel right with Misha, he started dating Sasha as well, proposing to the two of you to corner himself... But he couldn't keep lying to himself in the end, and...!"

"Misha...can you say something to her?"

"What an amazing story..."

Mom whipped around. "Lay!"

"Yes?"

"Everything will be all right. I'm on your side. Who cares if you're both men? Love comes before all else. That's why you should always, always stay true to those feelings. It'll be okay!"

Lay smiled. "Anos, can I ask what's going on here?"

"Mom tends to misunderstand things easily. Hold on, I'll clarify the—"

Just then, the door to the workshop flew open with a loud bang. Dad, for some reason, was standing frozen in his door-opening pose.

"Anos..." he eventually said, overcome with mysterious emotions. "It must have been tough for you... Good for you for telling us. Believe it or not, I can understand your feelings just a little! When I was young, there was this one time I saw a pretty little boy and thought, 'Yeah, I'd hit that!'"

Wasn't that a crime?

"You can't help who you like. I can understand you there. But, um...what do you do about *that*?"

"That'?"

"You know, *that*. Are you, like, the entering side? If so, I can almost understand... But if you're the *entered* side, then I can't... I want to, but—" Dad lowered his voice to a whisper, his face deadly serious. "Does it feel that

good...?”

Father, that isn't a question to be asking your son with such interest...

Well, whatever. Dad was always jumping to conclusions like this.

“In any case,” I said, choosing to ignore him, “you may not have noticed, but we have another guest.”

“Wha— Anos!” Sasha cut in. “Are you serious right now? You’re going to make this situation even messier!”

“No matter. I can just explain things later.”

Misha cocked her head confusedly.

“You haven’t explained a single thing until now!” Sasha yelled.

Misha nodded in agreement.

“Sasha, don’t underestimate me.”

Misha blinked.

“When it comes to explaining yourself, I have absolutely no hope for you at all.”

Misha nodded once more.

“Aha ha...” a nervous voice interrupted from the doorway. “Should I just keep hiding here, or...?”

Mom and dad looked up, both noticing Misa for the first time. They beamed at her instantly.

“Oh my!” mom cried. “Welcome, welcome! I’m sorry I didn’t see you there. You must be one of Anos’s friends.”

“Sorry you had to see that just now,” dad apologized, “but please make yourself at home! What’s your name?”

Sasha looked appalled. “Why does Misa get treated normally?! Where did all that fuss about infidelity and polygamy and homosexuality go?!”

Her outcry against my parents’ unreasonable behavior thundered throughout the house.

§ 12. Mom and Dad's Feelings

With introductions out of the way, we gathered in the kitchen to make dinner.

"I'm so sorry to make you help when you're all tired out from the exam," mom said apologetically as she began to prepare her infamous mushroom gratin. "There were so many customers today, I didn't have time to start cooking."

"It's no problem at all," Sasha replied, chopping the huge pile of mushrooms Misha had washed into bite-size pieces. "You're always treating us to such good meals."

Misha nodded. "Cooking is fun."

"Okay, that's all the veggies washed. Let's start peeling the potatoes." Dad moved the washed potatoes into a bowl and carried them over. "They're going into the curry, so chop them up nice and small after you've peeled them."

"There's quite a lot, so let's split the work," Misa suggested, looking at the bowl. "Oh, but there's only one knife..."

"Ah, that's right. I've made new ones, but they're in my workshop. I'll go get them."

"There's no need for that," Lay interjected, stopping dad in his tracks. He turned to Misa. "Can you pass me the knife?"

With the knife in one hand and the bowl of potatoes in the other, Lay flung the contents of the bowl into the air.

"Hah...!"

With a flash of his hand, the potatoes in the air were peeled in an instant. They fell into a nearby dish as the skins landed in the original bowl.

"Oh? Nice work. Then I shall face you with these carrots," I said, showing Lay the bowl in my hand. "Whoever peels more wins. How about it?"

“You’re on.”

Overhearing us, Misa smiled wryly. “But there’s only one knife.”

“I can use this.” I held up a peeler.

“You might regret that,” Lay pointed out.

“We’ll see about that.”

Sparks flew as our eyes met. Taking that as a silent cue, I tossed the carrots into the air.

“There...!”

“Too slow.”

Knife and peeler flashed as peeled carrots rained down into dishes.

“Count them,” I told Misa.

“Um, let’s see... Lord Anos’s dish has ten carrots...and Lay’s dish also has ten. It’s a tie.”

Lay smiled cheekily, offering his dish to Misa. “Take a closer look.”

Misa stared into Lay’s dish. “Oh!”

With a cry of realization, she touched a carrot. It practically fell apart in her hand. At a glance, it looked merely peeled, but a closer inspection revealed that it had also been cut into pieces. And that applied to all ten of them.

“What is this? They’ve been cut into heart shapes!” Misa exclaimed in surprise. In a single instant, Lay had not only peeled the carrots, but also cut them all into bite-size hearts. That was no ordinary feat.

“What do you think?” Lay asked, smiling triumphantly.

I pointed to the carrots in my own dish. “See for yourself.”

Lay stared at them closely, then gasped and stabbed one with his knife. “This is...star-shaped...!”

All my carrots had been peeled and cut into bite-size stars.

“H-How did you do that with a peeler?!” Misa cried. She looked shocked—which was only natural. Peelers existed for the purpose of peeling skin alone.

She wouldn't have expected me to use it to cut the carrots into pieces, much less into star-shaped bites.

"No need to be amazed. Adapting a tool beyond its intended use is child's play to the Demon King."

In a peaceful era with easy access to the proper tools, there was no need to use things like peelers to cut carrots into stars. But that hadn't been the case two thousand years ago.

"I guess you win this one," Lay mumbled, reaching for another bowl.

"Hmm. So you wish to settle this with onions instead. Interesting."

Onions flew into the air. Lay and I moved simultaneously—

"All that fooling around over there..." Sasha glared in our direction as she helped mom with the gratin.

"Tee hee, my little Anos is so good at peeling vegetables. Those onions will be ready in no time! Isn't it amazing?"

Sasha observed mom's affable reaction questioningly. "How come you never seem shaken by anything?"

It seemed that Sasha was getting used to speaking her mind around mom.

"You're not surprised?" Misha asked as well.

Mom grinned cheerfully. "He he. Of course I'm surprised—every day is a new series of surprises. He was born one moment, then was all grown up the next. He's so clever; he could use magic right away. He said he wanted to attend the Demon King Academy in Dilhade, and then he brought all these classmates home."

"Don't you ever feel scared?" Sasha asked.

Mom looked at her in confusion. "Hm?"

"Ah..." Sasha murmured, immediately regretting her words.

"People were scared of Sasha because of her magic," Misha explained.

"Her parents too?"

“Yeah.”

“I see.” Mom wrapped her arms around Sasha, hugging her tightly. “That must have been so hard for you, Sasha dear.”

“I-It was nothing. I had Misha with me...” Sasha mumbled, her face buried in mom’s chest as mom patted her.

“You know, the doctors told me my body isn’t capable of having children.”

“Huh...?”

“When I was pregnant with Anos, I was examined with magic. That was when they told me he wouldn’t be born healthy, and it would be better for me to give up—that the baby would be happier that way...” Mom smiled gently. “But I knew our little Anos was alive in my tummy, and I couldn’t give up no matter what. It didn’t matter if he was a little different, if he couldn’t study well, or if he was weak—I would love him the way he was, with all my heart. I would give him happiness.”

Before I knew it, dad was standing beside mom.

“Do you remember what you said back then, dear?” mom asked him. “You said that it wasn’t up to us to declare this child unhappy. Being different didn’t mean he couldn’t be happy.”

Dad nodded. “But when Anos was in his mother’s tummy, he was in a worse state than we thought. He almost died at one point.”

“Even with magic, there was nothing the doctor could do. I prayed every day asking for Anos to be born safely. I promised to raise him lovingly, no matter what.”

“What happened then?” Sasha asked.

“Anos’s heart stopped,” mom replied. “The doctor told us he’d died. But I couldn’t give up, so I prayed even harder for anyone, good or evil, to save my baby. Then, his heart started beating again.”

If we were to be absolutely precise, the child mom conceived *had* died. Or perhaps it was more accurate to say that it had never lived to begin with. The doctor’s diagnosis had been correct. Mom’s body was incapable of bearing a

child, and that child had never had a source to begin with.

Only a body had existed within mom's stomach, and that body had been destined to die before it was born. However, my reincarnation into that existing vessel had brought it back to life.

On very rare occasions, magic could be brought about by sheer willpower. Even a human that couldn't use magic—that had barely any power at all—could draw magic to themselves if their will was strong enough. Perhaps it was mom's desperate prayer that had called me to her.

"After that, Anos fully recovered, and my tummy got bigger and bigger. The doctors said it was a miracle." Mom smiled, faint tears shimmering in her eyes. "That's why I've never been afraid of him. He can be whatever he wants. He's alive and well—there's nothing more I could wish for."

Misha and Sasha both looked tearful at mom's story. Misa was wiping her eyes with a handkerchief, and even Lay looked a little solemn.

Everyone was probably thinking the same thing as I—*So that's why you can accept infidelity, polygamy, and homosexuality.*

§ 13. Misha's Gratin

After dinner, I had taken some time to myself and was resting in a chair alone.

Tonight's dinner had been even better than usual. Mom's mushroom gratin was truly a work of art. The only problem was that it was so delicious, I always ended up eating too much. But the satisfaction of a full stomach was equally as gratifying.

The others were in the workshop. Dad had promptly dragged Lay away after he'd expressed an interest in swordsmithing. The girls had accompanied them. They'd been gone for quite a while now but showed no signs of returning. I could hear occasional laughter drifting over from the workshop, so they must have been enjoying themselves.

I was leaning back in my chair absentmindedly when a noise from the kitchen caught my attention. Was it mom? I found myself looking over to check.

Instead of mom, I found Misha there.

"What are you doing?" I called.

She turned around calmly. "There's gratin."

Apparently, the fire was still going in the stone oven. She must have been baking the dish. We had just finished eating, so that was rather strange.

"What do you mean?"

"I'm making it."

"By yourself?"

Misha nodded, then added, "Your mother said I could."

"Hmm. I see no problem with that, but why?"

She blinked twice. "She taught me how."

Come to think of it, she and Sasha had helped mom make the gratin for dinner. They must have learned the recipe from her.

"I'm practicing alone."

Ah, that made sense.

"You wanted to practice making gratin?"

"Yeah."

"Well, mom's mushroom gratin *is* exquisite."

Misha nodded. "It's your favorite."

"You mean you're practicing it because I like it?"

She smiled faintly. There was the slightest blush on her cheeks. "I like seeing you happy."

What a cute thing to say.

"That's sweet of you."

Her eyes brightened. "You get along well with Sasha."

"That I do."

Sasha wore her heart on her sleeve, always speaking her mind without hesitation. I'd had no follower of the sort two thousand years ago, so I couldn't help poking fun at her from time to time.

"It's a good thing," Misha said, staring at me. "But it makes me a little lonely."

"Hmm. So that's what it is. You feel I've stolen your sister."

Her eyes widened subtly, and she shook her head. "No. The other way around." She pointed a finger at me.

"You feel that she's stolen me?"

Misha gave a minute nod, then looked up at me with an unusually insistent gaze. "I was friends with you first," she murmured quietly. "But now you're closer to her..."

I let out a chuckle in spite of myself. "So you can feel that way as well."

Her head drooped. "Jealousy is unbecoming..."

It seemed she couldn't control those feelings of hers.



“I’m not especially closer to Sasha, though.”

“Really?” Misha stared at me with a hint of suspicion.

“She just talks more.”

“I talk less...” she murmured dejectedly.

“That’s what I like about you.”

Misha’s frown eased. “Really?”

“Yes. Talking to you is calming.”

She smiled. “I’m glad.”

Hmm. It was good to have cleared up that misunderstanding.

“Yeah.”

Misha turned back to the stone oven and opened the door, removing the gratin with some oven mitts. The delicious aroma of white sauce and cheese wafted through the air.

“It’s done,” she said delightedly, placing the dish on the dining table. She scooped some up with a wooden spoon, blew on it a few times, and ate a bite. It must have turned out well, as she was nodding while savoring the taste.

“Is it good?” I asked.

Misha turned to me impassively. Then, she leaned over to scoop up another spoonful and held it up to me. “Want to try?”

“Oh, no thanks. I ate too much earlier.”

“...Okay,” she finally replied, staring at the spoon sadly.

Come to think of it, she had said she was practicing to make me happy. In that case, I had to take a bite, even if my stomach exploded.

“Hmm. But it seems I’m starting to feel a little peckish again. May I try some?”

At that, Misha beamed and nodded happily. She blew on the spoon to cool the gratin down, then brought it over to my mouth.

“Here,” she said, gesturing for me to open up.

I stared at her blankly. I wasn't a baby, so I could feed myself.

When I kept my mouth shut, she tilted her head in question. "Say ah...?"

She seemed to think I had misread her intentions, as she repeated her request aloud. Well, all right. I could grant her this much.

I opened my mouth, and Misha delivered the gratin. I chewed once, twice, and then swallowed. Mm, it was delicious! She had recreated the taste of mom's gratin to perfection.

"Well...?"

"It's perfect."

Misha giggled. "Seconds?"

"Yes, please."

Misha brought another spoonful of gratin up to my mouth.

"Say ah..."

She seemed to think I wouldn't open my mouth without her prompting, as she repeated the same motions to feed me. My stomach had already been full to begin with, but I ended up eating all of the practice gratin anyway.

"That was delicious. You're very good at cooking, Misha."

"I'm just average..." she murmured shyly. "I'll make it again, though."

"You don't have to push yourself. We'll be no less close if you don't cook for me."

Misha looked troubled. "No more cooking?"

"If you want to cook, then you're most welcome to."

"I like making things."

Come to think of it, she specialized in creation magic.

"Then will you feed me again?"

"I promise."

"All right. I'll look forward to it."

I flicked my finger, sending the dish and spoon flying. With the help of a little magic, I cleaned them and returned them to the cupboard.

“Have you visited the workshop yet?” I asked her.

“Not yet.”

“Then let’s go together.”

“Okay.”

Misha and I left the kitchen together. I opened the door to the workshop to find mom inside.

“Where are Lay and the others?” I asked.

Mom held a finger to her lips to shush me. Upon closer inspection, I saw Sasha wrapped up in a blanket, fast asleep in the workshop.

“Sasha was feeling a little tired,” mom explained quietly.

She had certainly used a lot of magic during the team exam.

“Lay and Misa went out into the garden for some fresh air.”

Hmm. The garden, huh?

We left the workshop and stepped outside the house. The sun had already set, but it wasn’t that dark outside. We lived in a rather crowded residential district, so the light from various houses filtered outside.

“I wanted to thank you for today.”

Misa’s voice sounded quietly from the garden. I peered around the corner to see her sitting on the root of a tree. Lay was standing beside her.

“What for?” Lay asked.

“Heh heh. You invited me, remember? If you hadn’t asked, I wouldn’t have been able to join Lord Anos’s team. So thank you.”

Lay smiled faintly. “That wasn’t my intention.”

“Oh, so you don’t want me to feel indebted? How kind of you.” Misa giggled. These two were always laughing when they were together. “I’ve never met someone like you before.”

“Someone like me?”

“I mean... You’re a royal, but you don’t seem to care about status at all.”

Lay laughed coolly. “I’m pretty sure the Necron twins are the same.”

“Aha ha... But you’re still a little different from them. Sasha and Misha understand what it means to be a royal, yet side with Lord Anos anyway.”

“And that’s not the case for me?”

“It’s not. Honestly, it looks to me like you have no interest in anything to do with lineage at all. It might sound bad phrasing it this way, but it’s almost like you don’t care, you know?”

Lay chuckled. “You may be right. Like I said at the team exam, I don’t keep up with that sort of thing.” He looked away from Misa and stared into the distance. “The truth is, all I ever think about are swords. How can I swing my sword faster? How can I cut what I couldn’t cut before? Everything else is just a bother to me.”

“Is there a reason you can only think about swords?” Misa asked plainly.

“It’s just a part of living. Like having to eat.”

Misa burst into laughter. “You must find a lot of things bothersome, then.”

“I’m a carefree person at heart.” Lay looked back at Misa. “That’s why I don’t plan on joining the Unitarians. Though I don’t think Royalists are right either.”

“Ah, no, that’s not what I—” Misa waved her hands, flustered. She then composed herself and said seriously, “You know, I couldn’t help but think to myself that you might be the ideal person to join us. The fact we keep going on about royals and hybrids means we’ve already split demons into two groups in our heads. Someone who can truly say none of that matters is someone who doesn’t discriminate against others, or so I believe.”

“It’s a little troubling to be praised so much... Anyway, if you’re going to say that, surely Anos is the one who truly doesn’t care about anything.”

“Lord Anos is...”

“You can’t look at him impartially because you want to put him on a pedestal,

right?”

Misa looked at Lay in surprise. “You sure don’t mince your words.”

Instead of replying, Lay stared back. She averted her gaze awkwardly.

“We have no other option but to believe in Lord Anos, even though we know that might inconvenience him...”

“I don’t see anything wrong with it.”

Lay’s immediate response had Misa looking back at him in surprise.

“No matter what you and your group do, your actions won’t have much effect on him.”

Misa buried her face in her knees, unsure of how to respond.

“I’m not saying that to be nice; I actually believe it. You don’t have to worry or feel guilty about using him to your advantage, because he’s on another level than we are. Throwing a bucket of water into the sea won’t create a ripple. That’s how far beyond us he seems to me, personally.”

“How can you seem so sure when you’ve only just met him?”

Lay smiled. “It’s just a hunch. I’m not good at thinking too hard,” he said, making Misa giggle.

“I feel a little better now.”

“Could I ask you something as well?”

Misa looked at him curiously. “Sure.”

“You’re half demon, half spirit, right?”

“Yes...”

“Do you ever feel unwell?”

Seemingly perplexed, Misa shook her head. “Um... I can sometimes feel a little under the weather, but I’m generally in good health. Why do you ask?”

Lay remained silent for a moment. Then, with a rare serious expression, he said, “I’ve heard that those of your kind can’t live for very long.”

“What...?”

“None that I’m aware of are able to remain as energetic as you after using spirit magic. You must be special.”

“I...I suppose? I’ve never been aware of it myself...”

Lay held out a hand. “Let’s go back. It’s getting cold out.”

“Ah, okay,” Misa said, taking it and standing up. “But really, thank you so much for today. I hope to nurture a community with more people just like you, Lay— Ah.” Misa looked panicked. “S-Sorry. It must be a bother to be told that.”

“Not at all.” Lay grinned. “I’ll be cheering for you. I’m pretty fed up with stuff being forced on me because I’m royalty—because I’m one of the Cohort of Chaos.”

With a delighted look, Misa clenched her fists. “Leave it to me. I’ll do my best to make a world where you can live at your own leisure!”

§ 14. The Unitarian Demon Elder

Sometime later.

The second lecture hall of the Demon King Academy.

“...Finally, for some upcoming matters. The Dilhade Demon Sword Tournament is scheduled to be held at Delsgade in the near future, and the academy will be entering some of its best students. First-year students are rarely nominated on the grounds of their ability, but there is someone in this class skilled enough to obtain a nomination.”

Emilia’s announcement had the class stirring noisily.

“Who do you think it is?”

“Don’t be stupid. There’s only one person it could be.”

Emilia looked at the nominated student, who had been listening with a carefree expression. “Lay Grandsley. Congratulations, the Demon King Academy looks forward to your results.”

She began clapping, and the students followed suit. Lay smiled in his usual manner, showing no sign of excitement. This was in stark contrast to the rest of the class, who, having witnessed Lay’s abilities with the sword, began busily discussing his chance of victory.

“He *is* the Demon Swordmaster, after all—maybe he’ll win the whole thing!”

“Yeah, he was even able to defeat a Demon Elder in a sword fight.”

“If someone from our class wins the Demon Sword Tournament, I can totally brag to everyone.”

Emilia’s voice cut through the commotion. “There’ll be one more entrant,” Emilia announced.

This time, the classroom stirred in a different way.

“One more... Was there anyone else here who seemed worthy of entering the

tournament?”

“I can’t think of anyone. Lady Sasha is one of the Cohort of Chaos, but she wasn’t that good with a sword. I doubt she’s cut out for the tournament.”

“Well... There is one person, right? Someone who could compete with Lay...”

“But he’s...”

The collective gaze of my classmates settled on me.

“Anos Voldigoad,” Emilia continued. “You, too, have been nominated to enter the Demon Sword Tournament. Make sure you don’t bring any shame to the academy.”

Shrieks rose from a certain corner of the room.

“Yeeeeeeeeees! Lord Anos’s time has finally come!”

“His victory is as good as guaranteed, right?!”

“Yup! Victory and hall of fame entry in the bag!”

“What should I do?! I’m getting nervous!”

“Why are *you* the one getting nervous?”

“Because we have to form a cheer squad for Lord Anos! We can’t let him fight alone!”

Between the fan union’s screams, the dissent of some of the royals could be heard.

“What’s the meaning of this? I’ve never heard of a white-uniform entering the Demon Sword Tournament...”

“Yeah, be it general admission or special admission, mixed-bloods are meant to be rejected in the screening process...”

“No matter how strong Anos is, the academy must be out of its mind to nominate him for the tournament. What were they thinking?”

Emilia continued without addressing their complaints. “You will require a sword to participate in the Demon Sword Tournament, so please make arrangements to obtain one yourself. I’m sure you know the rules already, but

there will be no changing of swords during the tournament, and participants will be disqualified the moment their sword is destroyed. The use of magic to harm one's opponents is prohibited, as fights must be conducted using swords alone. For a more detailed run-through of the regulations, you're free to speak to one of the officials at the arena."

I see. So I could only fight with a sword that was prepared in advance. That meant it wasn't just a match in swordsmanship, but in our demon swords' abilities as well.

"That is all. This concludes today's lesson," Emilia said. With that, she exited the classroom, and the students began preparing to leave.

Lay leaned back in his seat, lounging across the desk to look my way. "I hope we'll be placed in brackets that allow us to meet up in the finals."

"Perhaps this time we can settle things with proper demon swords," I suggested.

Lay grinned. "I know the feeling—wanting to fight to your heart's content and all."

"But the brackets won't be the only problem," I said.

"I can't imagine you losing."

"The people of this academy seem to think otherwise."

Lay sat up and turned to face me.

"After all, why would they nominate me if they believed I would win?" I asked.

He didn't have an answer. He wasn't exactly well versed in matters of royalty and mixed blood.

"The royals are surely against the idea of a hybrid such as myself winning the tournament. The easiest way to prevent me from doing so would be to forbid me from entering—yet they went out of their way to nominate me for a position I don't even qualify for."

It was clear there was an ulterior motive at hand.

“That does sound strange,” Misa chimed in.

I looked at her. “Do you know something?”

“No, not personally...but someone knowledgeable will be visiting today, so you can try to ask him some questions.”

“Who might that be?”

“Lord Melheis of the Seven Demon Elders. The one you agreed to meet the other day.”

Come to think of it, we had come to such an agreement.

“Where is he?”

“He’s at the union tower. I’m sorry it’s such short notice—he had another appointment canceled on him at the last minute. Do you have time to meet him now?”

“Sure thing.”

“Thank you very much. If it’s okay with you, let’s get going.”

We left the classroom and headed for the Anos Fan Union’s headquarters, where we climbed the stairs to the top floor. On our way, we passed a chorus of lively voices resounding from the second floor.

“Okay! Let’s run through the cheer song from the top! One, two... One, two, three, four!”

“Strongest in history, Lord Anos is he! Defeating you instantly with his mighty sword!”

“Oh, oooh, how we wish to be killed! Turn us into the rust on his blade!”

“With a fighting form so elegant, Lord Anos, he be! Merciful and compassionate is our lord!”

“Passionate in bed, let’s not forget! His manly sword pierces the heavens, I bet!”

“Oh, oooh, how we wish to submit! Turn us into the rust on his blade!”

“Manly sword in hand, Lord Anos descends! Infinite proliferation of mixed-

bloods ahead!”

“It’s the only solution, oh yes, oh yes! To a world with no royalty, full speed ahead!”

“Oh, oooh, how we wish to fall! His mighty sword spells the defeat of all!”

Hmm. I’ll pretend I didn’t hear that.

That aside, hadn’t they mentioned the cheer squad at the end of class just now? How was their chant already at such a high degree of completion?

I didn’t want to think too much about it, but it was probably the fruits of their labor. I banished the lyrics and uselessly catchy tune from my head and continued up the stairs.

“Lord Melheis, I’ve brought Lord Anos.”

An elderly man with a long white beard was waiting in the room that housed the half demon sword. He was dressed in a robe and held a staff in his hands. I could tell from the wavelength of his magic that he had been created by me—meaning this must indeed be the Demon Elder, Melheis Boran.

This demon was one I had created with an emphasis on magic ability and power, in hopes that he would survive much longer. Unlike Ivis and Ydol, he had power to rival that of the strongest fighters of the Mythical Age.

Melheis approached me silently. I didn’t sense any particular hostility from him. He stopped a few feet away from me, activated his Eyes, and inspected me closely.

Several seconds later, he kneeled on the spot, a single tear spilling down his cheek.

“I have long awaited your return, my most revered liege, Demon King Anos Voldigoad.”

Hmm. That was an unexpected introduction.

“Melheis, do you remember me?”

The Demon Elder shook his head. “To my greatest shame, I do not. I was bested by a fiend who erased my memories. Nevertheless, my source

remembers my liege. Now that I'm face-to-face with you, I am sure of it."

Ah, so his memories were in the same state as Ivis and the others.

"In that case, allow me to verify the truth."

"As you wish."

I grabbed Melheis's head and used Rivide and Eviy to search the surface of his memories. Like the others', they were completely devoid of my existence.

Next, I stared into the abyss with my Eyes to investigate Melheis's source. There was only one. It seemed that Melheis hadn't been fused with a follower of Avos Dilhevia, at the very least.

"How much do you know?" I asked him.

"I was assaulted two thousand years ago, soon after you departed this world. My assailant erased my memories, and I woke up in Ahalthern."

He woke up in the Forest of the Great Spirits?

"You crossed the wall?"

"That seems to be the case. My memories are unclear, but I can only assume I used the wall to escape my assailant."

At that point in time, Dilhade and Ahalthern had been separated by a magic wall. Although I had cast the greater spell at the cost of my life, a powerful demon of the Mythical Age would have still possessed the means to cross it. However, there had been fewer than twenty individuals capable of such a feat, and there would have been a high price to pay in order to do so. Of course, there were exceptions.

"Crossing the wall would require expending a large amount of magic, so chasing you would have resulted in the assailant leaving Dilhade for quite some time. Thus, they gave up on pursuing you—does that sound plausible?"

"Indeed, that is what I think as well. By the time I had regained enough power to cross the wall back to Dilhade, one hundred years had passed."

Unlike Ivis, Melheis had the power to cross the wall. His memories may have been lost, but his source had been spared.

“By the time I returned to Dilhade, the name of the Demon King of Tyranny had already changed to Avos Dilhevia. I had no memories, but something about the name always felt wrong to me. The other Demon Elders had complete faith in Avos Dilhevia, but I’ve always had my doubts.”

“And those doubts have now turned to conviction.”

Melheis bowed his head politely. “They have indeed. My source is telling me that you are the true Demon King.”

There were no inconsistencies in his story, but the only information to be gained was that Avos Dilhevia had existed back in the Mythical Age.

Two thousand years ago, a myriad of enemies had opposed me, but there were three that had stood out from the rest: Hero Kanon, Great Spirit Reno, and Goddess of Creation Militia. These three had the power to cross the wall unscathed.

However, these were the same three that had assisted my creation of the wall. They had sought the same peace I had. Even if they had decided I was an unneeded presence for peaceful times, was there any need for them to do something so convoluted? I couldn’t imagine them having any desire for the position of Demon King of Tyranny. In that case, was this the work of someone else?

“Do you have any idea what Avos Dilhevia is scheming?” I inquired.

“Not the slightest idea, I’m afraid.”

Well, that was no surprise. There were limits to what one could investigate alone.

“Report to me if you catch wind of anything.”

“As you wish.”

It seemed the best course of action would be to start with upcoming matters.

“One more thing. Someone in Delsgade has nominated me for the Demon Sword Tournament. What is their goal?”

Melheis thought for a moment. “Are you familiar with the Royalists, my liege?”

“The group that believes in the supremacy of royalty.”

He nodded. “Royalists are purebloods who seek to extend their current privileges. They have the extremist belief that only royalty can have power over demonkind.”

Hmm. Misa had mentioned that already, but they truly were a ludicrous group.

“Truth be told, there are many Royalists in Delsgade right now. I believe your nomination was their handiwork.”

“Why would they want to nominate me?”

“As a way of containing the Unitarians. There has been talk amongst both factions of your domination over the academy. None of the royals have been able to stand up to you—not even the Seven Demon Elders. It’s the primary reason the Unitarians have been gaining momentum, and the Royalists are unimpressed.”

“So they plan on crushing the momentum of the Unitarians by defeating me in the Demon Sword Tournament?”

Melheis nodded. “The Royalists can no longer continue to ignore you. If they prevent you from entering, the Unitarians will gain more solidarity by claiming you could have won if you had been given the chance. Mixed-blood demons far outnumber royalty. What the Royalists fear the most is the unification of those hybrid demons.”

“If that’s true, then it’s pure folly. That plan relies entirely on me being defeated in the Demon Sword Tournament.”

“Lord Anos,” Melheis said seriously. “If I may submit my humble opinion on this matter—please consider declining the nomination.”

“Why?”

“We may be insignificant to you, but you are a shining light to us Unitarians. We cannot afford for that light to be extinguished.”

Melheis was a Unitarian. His suspicion of Avos Dilhevia was probably what had led him to become one, but there had to be a part of him that disagreed

with the discriminatory rule of Dilhade.

“I don’t mean to give the Royalists the upper hand,” the Demon Elder said, bowing his head reverently. “I know that my liege would not lose. There is nothing that could possibly defeat you. However, that doesn’t guarantee that you shall win the match.”

I had a rough idea of what Melheis feared.

“You think they’ll use the rules against me.”

“I know it may sound ludicrous, but even if it’s clear that your power vastly transcends theirs, all they need to achieve their goal is for you to forfeit the match.”

These were demons that valued blood over ability. Such methods suited them.

“In that case, they won’t retract the nomination even if I decline. They’ll claim that I ran away like a coward.”

“As long as you refrain from showing up to the match, I shall handle the rest. Please grant me this mercy, my liege.”

It seemed a Demon Elder had the power to do that much, at the very least.

But goodness—what a bother. Well, it wasn’t as though I were particularly intent on participating in the tournament anyway.

“I’ll consider it.”

“I am most grateful,” Melheis said, bowing his head deeply.

§ 15. Misha's Question

After further discussion with Melheis, I returned home. Mom normally greeted me from the front of the store, but the shop was closed, what with it being so late.

I was instead greeted by a calm voice. "You're back," Misha said, sticking her head out of the kitchen.

Hmm. I can't say I wasn't surprised.

"What's up?"

"I'm practicing."

Just then, mom appeared behind her. "Anos, you're home! Dinner will be ready soon. Misha helped make it."

"Were you learning how to cook from mom?"

Misha nodded.

"The other day, Misha was telling me all about how she wanted to make something delicious for you, so I invited her to come over whenever she was free!"

Ah, so they'd made some kind of arrangement.

"Okay, I'm going to go work on the finishing touches!" mom sang cheerily.

"Me too."

"You've helped enough for today, Misha. The rest is just simple stuff you can pick up without supervision. Go and chat with Anos, okay?"

Misha thought for a moment, then nodded.

At that moment, dad came out of his workshop. It seemed he'd finished work for the day. "Ah, Anos. Welcome home."

"Hey, dad."

“I heard you’ve gone and done it again! The Demon Sword Tournament, was it?”

Mom flashed me a beaming smile. “Oh, that’s right! Congratulations, Anos! Ms. Emilia came and told us the news. Only two students from your class were chosen, right? That’s so amazing! My little genius!”

She wrapped me in a tight hug.

If Emilia had come all this way to inform mom and dad, the Royalists must really want me to participate in the tournament.

“I still don’t know if I’ll participate.”

“Huh? Why? Won’t a good result in the Demon Sword Tournament make it easier to become a demon lord?”

That was news to me.

“Is that true?” I asked Misha.

She nodded. “You need to attain actual results to become a demon lord. The tournament counts towards that.”

Was that so? Even in this peaceful era, one had to prove their strength to secure their position.

“Even if I wanted to participate, I don’t have a sword,” was my excuse in the meantime.

“If it’s a sword you need, you can leave that to your good ol’ dad! What kind of sword are you after?”

Honestly speaking, that wasn’t something I could leave in dad’s hands even if I were planning to participate...

“A normal sword isn’t enough. All the participants have demon swords, so a single swing would break it.”

Dad crossed his arms, thinking. “Demon swords... Ah! I’ve heard of them before. They’re those swords made of a special metal, right? Sharp enough to slice through anything.”

Dad’s blacksmithing knowledge originated in a remote town of the human

continent. He thought of demon swords only as sharp blades, rather than weapons imbued with magic.

“All right. I’m going out for a bit,” he announced with a smug expression.

I had a bad feeling about this.

“We’re about to have dinner...” I protested.

“Izabella. I’ll be gone for two to three days. Take care of the store while I’m gone,” dad said confidently.

Mom smiled. “Sure thing. Take care of yourself, dear.”

They seemed to be working themselves up over something, but any sword dad made would be shattered by a demon sword in an instant. In any case, I hadn’t even decided if I was entering or not, so he’d be making the trip for nothing.

“Dad, there’s no point in getting me a sword.”

“No, no, this isn’t about that. I’ve just got a little business to attend to. It has nothing to do with the sword. Not at all.”

Why would a little business take him away from home for two to three days? The excuse was simply implausible.

“Even if I had a sword, I’m not—”

“I know, I know. Save the rest of that sentence for when I get home.” Dad slapped me on the shoulder, laughing heartily. “See you later. Look after your mom for me.”

“No, dad—”

Dad slapped me on the shoulder, laughing heartily. “See you later. Look after your mom for me.”

I stared at him blankly. What was this?

“Listen, dad. I—”

Dad slapped me on the shoulder, laughing heartily. “See you later. Look after your mom for me.”

Was he a broken construct?

“Then...I will, don’t worry.”

Dad gave me a thumbs-up as if he’d been waiting for me to say that.

Good grief. What a headache.

“See ya!” Dad flung open the door and left.

I stared after him, unsure what to say.

Hmm. Well, whatever. The blacksmith side of the store could benefit from a good sword, even if it wasn’t adequate for the tournament. Dad had little interest in expanding the shop and increasing profits, so it wouldn’t hurt to have him work hard at his job for once.

Besides, words weren’t enough to stop him once he misunderstood something.

“Okay, then! I’m going to go finish up dinner,” mom said. With that, she returned to the kitchen.

“You’re not entering the tournament?” Misha asked once we were alone.

“It seems the Royalists plan on imposing rules to force my defeat. Not that I would lose no matter how unfavorable those rules may be, but I have nothing to gain by participating.”

If this was one of Avos Dilhevia’s plots, then I would willingly go along with it. If things went well, I might even be able to expose his true colors. But if this was the completely unrelated work of the Royalists acting out of disdain, then there would be no point. When it came to a trivial sports tournament like this, I was willing to grant Melheis his request. That meant...

“Come.”

As I spoke the word, an owl flew in through the window. It was a familiar.

“Go.”

After sending instructions through Leaks, the owl flew off again.

“Misha, there’s no school tomorrow, right?”

Misha nodded.

“Do you have any plans?”

She shook her head.

“Then would you like to hang out together?”

Misha stared at me impassively. “Hang out?”

“Yes.”

She fell silent for a moment, thinking to herself. “Just the two of us...?”

“Is that a problem?”

She quickly shook her head. “I’m looking forward to it,” she then said with a smile.

“Is there anywhere you want to go?”

“Anywhere.”

“What about anything you want to do?”

“Anything.”

Hmm. So there was nothing she wanted. But knowing Misha, there was a chance she was holding back.

“What do you want to do, Anos?”

“Let me think. I’m fine with anything, but if I had to pick, then I want to do something you like to do,” I replied.

Misha blinked in surprise. “Something I like?”

“Yes.”

“It might be boring...”

“It’d be nice to do something boring for a change.”

Misha smiled. “You’re kind.”

“Am I?”

She nodded. “I’ll tell you.”

I questioned her with a look, and she continued. "What I like, that is."

"Go on, what is it?"

"No, not yet. It's a secret."

So she was saving it for tomorrow.

Misha stared at me silently. I waited for her to say something, but she remained quiet. However, it looked like she wanted to.

"What's wrong? If you've got something to ask, out with it."

"Um..." she mumbled somewhat shyly, "what kind of clothes do you like?"

"Clothes? I'm not the type to care about outward appearances, but if I had to pick something, it would be a frock coat."

"A frock coat?" Misha blinked. "Will I look good in one...?" she asked a little uneasily.

"Hmm?"

"Ah."

That was when we both realized our conversation had misaligned slightly.

"Were you asking about what you should wear?"

Misha nodded.

"Hmm. But I don't know much about women's clothing."

"What color do you like...?"

If it was the color she would wear, then...

"Let's see... I think white would be nice. You look good in your school uniform."

Her eyes widened a fraction. Then she smiled. "Do you like skirts or pants better?"

"I've never been asked such a question before..."

Misha took a step closer to me, staring right at my face. "Which do you like more?"

She was being much more assertive than usual. Now, how should I answer?

“I’m not sure I have a preference...”

“Pants?” she asked, staring into my eyes. “Skirts?” Then her questions continued. “Do you prefer more formal clothes?”

Formal clothes as in ceremonial dress? Well, it wasn’t bad, but I wouldn’t call it a preference.

“Or more casual clothes?”

Preferences aside, I’d never really considered these things before. It was difficult to decide which was better whilst being questioned in rapid succession.

“Got it,” she said before I could answer, backing down.

“Anos, Misha! Dinner’s ready!” mom called from the living room.

“Shall we go?” Misha asked.

“Are you done with the questions...?”

At that, Misha giggled.

I headed for the living room alongside Misha, who seemed to be enjoying herself much more than usual.

§ 16. The Legendary Appraiser

In the end, dad didn't return home that day.

He was a blacksmith by profession, so I wanted to believe he wouldn't mess up when it came to swords—but I wasn't completely reassured.

I was confident I'd be able to deal with anything that happened, so there was no reason to worry, and yet...

"What a strange feeling..."

"Anos! Misha's here for you!" mom yelled from downstairs. I stood up from my chair and left my room to head down to the shop.

Misha and mom were waiting there.

"Morning," Misha said. She was wearing a white dress and had a ribbon in her hair.

"That's an outfit I haven't seen on you before."

"It's new..."

I see. No wonder the fabric looked so pristine.

"Is it weird?" she asked, looking up at me.

"No. You look good in it. It's a lovely dress."

She blushed faintly. "It's your preference."

"Mine? Well, I do think it's nice, but I never answered any of your questions, did I?"

At that, Misha smiled just like she had the day before. "I can tell by your eyes."

"Oh? Is that so."

"Yeah."

As far as I knew, I hadn't answered any of her questions, but it seemed she'd

seen through me. Her Eyes really could see everything.

“I’m impressed you noticed. Well done, Misha.”

It was quite the talent. If she trained right, her skill had the potential to compete with that of demons of the Mythical Age.

“Thank you.”

Misha seemed satisfied with my response.

“All right. I’ll be off now, mom.”

“Have fun!” chirped mom as cheerily as ever as she sent us on our way.

Once outside, I paused and turned to Misha.

“So, you were going to tell me what you like to do, right?”

Misha nodded. “This way,” she said, starting off down the street.

I walked close beside her, looking forward to our destination.

We eventually reached Midhaze, a shopping district where many stores lined the streets. This street in particular was the busiest in the area, with countless people coming and going.

“Here.”

Misha stopped before a building. The sign read: “Homeland of the Creation Dragon: Magic, Models, and More.” It was a rather large store. Misha opened the door and led us inside, where a woman wearing a hat greeted us.

“Why, if it isn’t Misha. Welcome! Making something new today?”

“Yeah.”

“Excellent! By the way, I’ve already found a buyer for the model castle you made the other day. You’ve been such a help,” the woman said, opening a door to the back. “Who might this young man be?”

Misha glanced at me, then shook her head. “My friend.”

“Anos Voldigoad,” I said, introducing myself to the woman who appeared to be the store owner.

“Melissa Nomad. It’s a pleasure.”

“Likewise. What’s a magic model, may I ask?” I asked.

Melissa looked surprised. “To think there’s someone who doesn’t know in this day and age... You’re not from Dilhade, are you? Where do you hail from?”

From two thousand years ago, to be precise—but she was unlikely to believe that.

“A remote town on the border of Azesion, the human continent.”

“Ooh, I see. So Misha brought you here to show you her magic models.”

Misha nodded wordlessly.

“Well, come right in. You’ve got the workshop all to yourselves.”

I followed Misha and Melissa into the workshop. Drawn on the floor were several magic circles. These were not just any magic circles, but restricted circles—unmovable circles that restricted the type of magic that could be cast in exchange for greatly improved accuracy.

There were several long tables and shelves set up around the room, occupied by glass globes. Within the globes were small scenes of buildings, trees, and flowers. It was almost as if pieces of the world had been cut out and shrunk down to fit the glass.

“Well, what do you think? These are magic models. Amazing, aren’t they? The one Misha made the other day is over here, by the way.” Melissa gestured at a glass orb occupied by a castle in a forest. It was a miniature version of the castle she had created during the team exam. The backdrop was the enchanted forest.

In front of the globe was a label that indicated it had already sold.

“I see, so you’re making these with Iris.”

Misha nodded.

Making huge objects using Iris required quite a lot of magic and knowledge about spell formulae, but making detailed miniatures required even more. That must be why restricted magic circles were employed for the task.

“The smaller and more detailed, the better the magic model,” Melissa explained.

It was a difficult task, after all. The model that Misha had made was small enough to fit into one's palm, yet was still intricately detailed.

"Is this what you like to do, Misha?"

"I like making detailed things."

Her usually monotonous voice sounded livelier than usual.

"Watch me." Misha held her hand over the restricted magic circle and activated it. "Dinner together," she said.

She cast Iris, and a glass globe formed in her hand. Within that globe, my living room was taking shape. Dishes upon dishes were lined up across a table, around which Misha, Sasha, Lay, Misa, and my parents were seated. It was the spitting image of our dinner together the previous evening.

Misha made it look easy, but recreating the details of a scene from memory alone was challenging. Perhaps she had the ability to instantly memorize what she saw.

At any rate, she seemed to be having fun. Her normally blank expression was ever so slightly softened, but her gaze was serious as she stared intently at the magic model.

Suddenly, she stopped casting and looked up at me. "Is it boring?" she asked a little anxiously.

"No, it's fascinating. It may just be a hobby craft, but pursuing a smaller and more intricate model will lead you deeper into Iris's abyss."

Misha laughed softly. "You really like magic."

"Not particularly..."

She shook her head. "You like it."

Hmm. I hadn't considered that before. Magic came to me as naturally as breathing.

"You really think so?"

Misha nodded.

"Then perhaps you're right."

Considering Misha's words, I realized there were still so many things I had yet to learn about myself.

She then resumed casting Iris. More and more details were worked into the model, and several minutes later, there was a miniature figure of myself beside our dining table inside the globe. The magic model was complete.

"It's done."

"That's quite the work of art."

Misha looked down at her completed creation. My living room had been recreated within the globe right down to the smallest detail. It would be hard to find anyone better at casting Iris in this era.

"Want to try?"

"If I do, I'll end up crafting a masterpiece unlike anything else in this world."

Behind me, the store owner burst out laughing. "That's quite the claim, mister! But magic models have been around for five hundred years now. It isn't as simple as it seems."

"Really? In that case, could you show me the best magic model in existence?"

"Ah... The best one isn't in this store, but we do have one of the greats. Depending on who you ask, some might even consider it the best. Follow me."

With a spring in her step, Melissa started walking. We followed her into what appeared to be an exhibition space bustling with other people. It seemed that Dilhade's magic model scene was more popular than I'd thought.

"Back here we keep a real treasure: one of the top ten magic models in the world. The creator is unknown, but it's believed that a prominent demon spent several decades crafting it."

Melissa showed us to the back of the store, where the magic models on display were much more elaborate. These must have been their pricier assets.

We proceeded further until we reached the back corner, which featured the most extravagant display yet. A gentleman in a monocle was standing over the piece, accompanied by what appeared to be a store attendant.

“Oh, oops,” Melissa said, groaning. “I didn’t think this through. You’ll have to wait a bit, sorry.”

There was only one person looking at the model. There was really no need to wait.

“That’s the one we’re looking for, right?” I asked. “There’s plenty of room around it.”

“Apologies. That’s the famous appraiser, Demil Graha. He’s known as the legendary appraiser around these parts—everyone in this industry knows his name. You can only be considered a top-class magic modeler if he approves of your work. That’s why it’s a little rude to look alongside him.”

So he got special treatment, huh? Oh well. I could see it well enough from where I stood.

“Hmm... I can see why it’s referred to as a treasure,” Demil said as he peered closely at the magic model. “It’s the size of one’s pinky, yet the contents have been faithfully reproduced down to the last detail. The appearance of this Delsgade has me inclined to agree with the rumors that the model was created hundreds of years ago. It’s splendid. There are probably fewer than five demons throughout all of history capable of this level of Iris.”

Curious as to how good it was, I used my Magic Eyes to look from afar.

“That’s what you consider one of the top ten magic models?”

“You can see it from here, mister? That’s right. Isn’t it amazing? I bet you regret your earlier statement,” Melissa said teasingly.

“Regret? Ha ha ha! Don’t be silly. I can make something like that with ease.”

At that, Demil, who had been staring intently at the magic model, looked up and turned towards us. He cast his piercing gaze on us disapprovingly.

“Who was that? Who uttered such blasphemy against this magnificent work just now?”

Jolted by his scolding tone, the bustling store fell silent.

“Heavens. If you don’t have the courage to name yourself, don’t make such thoughtless comments. As a magic model enthusiast, it pains me greatly to hear

you speak with such disrespect about such magnificent works. How shameful.”

I spoke up as he turned back to the model. “I was the one who spoke just now.”

Demil’s angry glare fixed on me.

“It wasn’t my intention to diminish the work. I was merely speaking the truth.”

He frowned at my words.

Beside me, a panicked Melissa chimed in urgently. “U-Um, mister...? How about you leave it at that...?”

“It’s fine,” Misha assured her.

“F-Fine? M-Misha, please say something to your friend.”

Misha stared back at Melissa. “It’s fine.”

“U-Um... Is it really...?”

Demil took one step towards me. “Are you a magic modeler?”

“No. But this level of Iris is a breeze to me.”

Demil snickered. “Dear me, this is why amateurs can be such a handful. Listen, young man, miniature models are much harder to make than you think. If you need proof to believe it, we can head to the workshop right now. What do you say?”

“There’s no need for that.”

Demil burst into laughter. “See? Show some discretion before you speak next time. I believe superior models and their creators deserve due respect.”

“What are you misunderstanding? I’m saying I don’t need to go to the workshop to make such a thing. I can make it right here.”

I held out my hand and drew a magic circle. The next moment, a pebble the size of a grain of sand appeared.

“This is...!” Demil trembled on the spot, staring with disbelief at the pebble.

Just then, Melissa stepped between us in a panic, bowing her head. “I...I’m so

sorry! This young man knows nothing about magic models. Please find it in your heart to forgive hi—”

She must have thought Demil was trembling in fury. But instead, he turned to her and said, “What are you saying?”

“Huh...?” Melissa looked bewildered.

“You own a magic model store, yet you know nothing. If you cannot see the splendor of this work, keep your mouth shut.”

The extreme change in Demil’s attitude left Melissa dumbfounded. Demil ignored her as he returned to staring at my minuscule pebble. He sent magic into his monocle and strained his Eyes.

“Oh my... This is even better than I expected... I cannot believe my eyes—no one would believe such a thing without seeing it in person. What?! Forming within this tiny grain is none other than the Demon Castle Delsgade! N-No, that isn’t just Delsgade... That’s... That’s a replica of the entire town! How?! I wouldn’t be able to see such detail even if I magnified my vision by ten thousand—no, by a million times!”

“If you want to see the details, you’d need one billion times the strength of vision.”

“O-One billion?! Are you saying you can create a magic model at one billionth scale?!”

“I told you it was a breeze.”

Demil was trembling from head to toe, his face frozen in astonishment. “H-How can this be...? You made a magic model at one billionth scale in a single instant, without the use of a restricted magic circle...”

The expert stared desperately at the minuscule model, exerting all his magic power. His monocle was probably a magic item fitted to magnify his vision.

“Marvelous... It’s a masterpiece! What precision! How can such a thing be possible? Young man—no, master! Please tell me your name!”

“It’s Anos Voldigoad.”

“Master Anos! I wish to see more of your works! I will promote you as the

greatest magic modeler in this world! Please consider letting me see all of your future masterpieces! I will readily purchase all your works at your asking price!”

Goodness, how dramatic. All the fuss Demil was making had attracted the attention of the other people in the store, who were all looking our way in curiosity.

It was time to retreat.

“Apologies, but I have no interest in becoming a master modeler.”

“Wha— Such a waste of talent! May I ask why? You’ll have all the fame and fortune you could dream of!”

“Unfortunately, I have no interest in that either.”

“N-No interest?!” Demil screeched. He then pointed at my hand, where the tiny model of Delsgade was hovering over my palm. “Th-Then at the very least, master, please sell me that magnificent work! I’ll pay as much as you want for it!”

“Unfortunately, I have another plan for this.”

“No! Master! Master Anos!”

I turned on my heel. “Sorry. I made a bit of a disturbance,” I said to Misha.

She shook her head. “You did nothing wrong.”

“But it’s still a disturbance.”

“That’s typical for you.”

Hmm. Nothing ever ruffled her.

“Shall we get out of here?”

“Yeah.”

Ignoring the surrounding commotion, Misha and I left the model shop behind us.

§ 17. Black Cat at the Cat Café

As we were walking down the street, Misha turned to me.

“What are you going to use the model for?”

“Ah, right.” I placed the newly made magic model on my palm and held it out to Misha. “It’s my first magic model, so I wanted you to take a look at it.”

Misha blinked, then smiled happily. “Thank you,” she said, focusing her eyes on the model.

“Well?”

“Amazing...” Misha stared at it closely, shifting around to view it from every direction.

I idly watched her intent observation for several minutes, but she showed no sign of looking away. It was my first time seeing her so immersed in something. Perhaps she was interested in both the making and viewing of magic models.

“It’s beautiful,” she finally said.

“Really?”

Misha nodded. “You’ve even filled in the places no one can see.”

So she’d noticed. I should have expected as much.

“The key to using Iris isn’t what’s on the outside, but what’s on the inside. If you want to make a sword, you have to think about its inner structure, or it won’t have any durability. Although magic models are for appearances’ sake, creating only the outside won’t make it resemble the real thing.”

Misha nodded, listening with a serious expression.

“As one would say in the Mythical Age, if you want to make a stone, do not create a stone; create the atoms that form a stone.”

“Who said that?”

“Me.”

Of course, it was easier said than actually done. There were very few people who ever succeeded.

Misha looked back at the magic model and continued to examine it.

“If you like it that much, it’s yours.”

Her eyes widened slightly. “Really?”

“As thanks for accompanying me today.”

I cast Iris to create a ring with the model set inside like a gemstone, then slid the piece onto Misha’s right index finger.

“Now you can look at it whenever you want. It’s just a dull ring with no shine, though.”

Misha shook her head, smiling in a reserved but joyful manner. “It’s most beautiful.”

“I see.”

She nodded, murmuring almost to herself as she looked at the ring. “You can do anything...”

“Well, nothing’s impossible.”

“I can’t do all that...” she replied somewhat dejectedly.

“I don’t believe that’s the case.”

Misha looked at me. “You saved me.”

“That’s true.”

“That’s why I want to repay you,” she continued. “Avos Dilhevia is an imposter. I want to be helpful to you.”

What a sweet thing to say.

“But if you can do anything, you don’t need me.”

I see. So that was why she was feeling down. Misha was as kind as always.

“That’s not necessarily true.”

She blinked at me.

“You have good Magic Eyes, and you’re skilled at creation magic. When it comes to those two things, you have the potential to surpass me.”

“Really...?”

“I am by no means almighty, and there’s no telling what impossibilities beyond our imaginations may appear in the future. In fact, the only thing in this world I can truly say I’m the best at is destruction.”

Until now, I had destroyed, destroyed, and destroyed again to change the impossible into the possible. But I wasn’t arrogant enough to believe I could do the same to everything that was to come. I was no fool. Besides, it never hurt to be overprepared.

“Creation is the opposite of that. Your magic may come in useful one day.”

Naturally, that meant Misha’s growth was indispensable.

“If you wish to be of help to me, you need to draw nearer to the abyss of magic.”

Misha nodded firmly, her eyes bright with her strong will. “Wait for me,” she said. “I’m always the one receiving, but I’ll repay you one day.”

“I’ll look forward to it.”

Just then, I heard the call of a cat. It was a black cat peering out the window of a building. The sign at the front read, “Catnip Café.”

“Meow, meow!” Misha called back, but the black cat disappeared inside. Her shoulders slumped sadly. “Meow...”

“Shall we go in?” I offered.

“Can we?”

“This is our destination.”

“Do you like cats too?”

“Something like that.”

We entered the Catnip Café, where the lively waitstaff greeted us. There were several cats wandering around inside, and Misha meowed at each as she passed. Once we were seated, a white cat pattered towards her and climbed

right onto her lap.

“Look, Anos,” she said happily. “It’s so cute.”

“Lucky you.”

She nodded. “Meow? Mya.”

Misha petted the white cat’s head as she imitated a cat’s meow. Of course, the cat didn’t respond, but it did relax there.

After I ordered some tea for the two of us, a black cat jumped onto the shelf behind me. It was the cat from the window earlier.

“Good work, Ivis.”

Misha looked at the black cat in surprise. Then, the black cat opened its mouth.

“Forgive me for appearing before you in such an unsightly form, my liege.”

“I’ll allow it.”

It was imperative that no one realized Ivis was still alive. Our reason for meeting this way, instead of contacting each other with magic, was to avoid Avos Dilhevia’s notice.

The owl I’d sent yesterday had been a signal that I wanted to meet. Upon receiving the signal, Ivis would be the one to make contact with me. We’d previously agreed on the arrangement back when I’d returned his memories using Leaks. I’d come out today not only to hang out with Misha, but also to keep an eye out for Ivis as we wandered around.

“Did you find anything?” I inquired.

“There’s something incomprehensible about Lord Melheis Boran,” Ivis reported. “He’s a part of the Unitarian faction, but he isn’t their leader.”

Hmm. That was strange. Someone as powerful as a Demon Elder should hold utmost authority amongst a group like the Unitarians.

“Then who’s leading them?”

“I haven’t had any success in my investigation. Their leader has never appeared in public. In fact, none of the Unitarians seem to know who it is.”

“Not even Melheis?”

“It appears not.”

How suspicious indeed.

I began to ponder. “Well, it would make sense if it’s a demon lord. Their position would be at risk if they were discovered as the leader of the Unitarians.”

The Seven Demon Elders were secure in their positions, but demon lords could be easily replaced.

“But if they can’t be tracked down by even you, then they may be a demon from the Mythical Age.”

It was possible their leader might even be Avos Dilhevia. However, if that were the case, what did he intend by leading them? Did he wish to control the balance of power between the Unitarians and the Royalists?

“I’ve discovered something as well,” I said. “Melheis, too, has lost his memories of me. And he only had one source.”

“Have you made contact with him?” Ivis asked.

“Yes. He examined my source and realized I was the Demon King of Tyranny. I believe he’s most likely an ally, but I have yet to tell him about you.”

Ivis silently awaited my orders.

“Investigate Melheis, and find the leader of the Unitarians. I skimmed over Melheis’s memories, but only at surface level. He may be using something besides fusion magic to prevent me from reading him.”

“Understood.”

“Have you found anything else?”

“One thing. It may be connected to the leader of the Unitarians.”

At that moment, the waitress brought over our tea. Ivis closed his mouth for the time being and waited for her to leave before continuing.

“In this city there’s a magic hospital called Lognorth, known for being the best healing facility in Dilhade. Demon Lord Elio Ludwell built it at his own expense.

However, Lord Elio is merely a puppet. There appears to be another demon acting behind the scenes, but...”

“But you can’t determine their identity, correct?”

Ivis nodded. “They and the leader of the Unitarians may be one and the same.”

“All right. Anything else?”

“There are a number of things, but none of them are confirmed facts.”

“One last thing from me, then. Find out more about the Demon Sword Tournament. Especially about the Seven Demon Elders’ involvement.”

“As you wish.”

Ivis left through the window.

An unidentified demon, huh? It made sense for the leader of the Unitarians to remain anonymous, but what was the purpose of the hospital? Were they connected? Or were there actually two different people running things behind the scenes? I had no idea, but I could always go and take a quick look.

After we’d finished our tea and taken a short rest, I had Misha show me to Lognorth Magic Hospital.

“We’re here,” she said upon our arrival.

“Hmm. It’s a pretty big building.”

“There are lots of hospitalized patients.”

There was nothing suspicious about it. I glanced over the building with my Magic Eyes, but I could only detect weak magic.

“Anos,” Misha said, interrupting my thoughts. She was pointing her finger at Lay—who had just come out of the hospital.

I started towards him and called out to catch his attention. “Hey.”

“Huh? Anos? Why are you here?”

“I was just passing by. Did you catch a cold or something?”

Lay’s usual smile seemed somewhat strained. “I was just visiting my mother.”

Did that mean she was unwell?

“Is she of poor health?”

“She was born with a weak constitution. It’s nothing to worry about.”

His expression was far too gloomy for that to be the case.

“If the doctors can’t heal her, I’ll take care of it.”

“Hah. So you’re good at healing magic too?”

“I wouldn’t call myself a professional, but I can make the sickliest patient in that facility healthy enough to hike over the Nier Mountains tomorrow.”

Lay grinned. “That might be a little too healthy.”

“True medical care can improve a patient’s well-being beyond the state of their prior health.”

“Sounds a little scary, so I’ll pass.”

Hmm. Perhaps it wasn’t that serious of an ailment after all.

“Oh, that’s right. I should probably let you know—I may not participate in the Demon Sword Tournament.”

A frown flashed across Lay’s face, but he quickly returned to his smile. “I see. Well then, let’s settle our score another time.”

“You’re not going to ask why?”

“Huh? Oh... Why?”

“Because I don’t feel like it.”

Lay looked taken aback. “Well... I think it’s good that you do what you want.”

“I expected you to urge me to participate.”

“I’m not a fan of ordering others around.”

Hmm. Well, that did sound like him.

“See you at school, then,” Lay said. Then, with a casual wave of his hand, he left.

I turned to Misha. “Your thoughts?” I asked.

“He was a little different than usual...”

“I thought so too.”

He almost seemed ashamed of something, but what? It normally wouldn't concern me, but our current location bothered me. I resolved to send Ivis to check this out as well.

§ 18. Demon Sword Tournament

The days passed by in the blink of an eye, and the day of the Demon Sword Tournament was upon us. I was just about to leave the house when mom came rushing over.

“Wait, Anos! Let’s go together.” Mom was exceptionally well-dressed—a rare occurrence for her.

“Are you coming to Delsgade?” I asked.

“Yup! Anyone can go see the tournament if they have a ticket, right? The academy sent me one, so I’m going to watch too.”

“I still might not enter, you know?”

The plan was to first meet Ivis at the academy to hear his report. Only then would I make the decision whether to participate.

“Because your sword won’t make it in time?” mom asked.

“Well, something like that.”

Even if I explained the details, mom wouldn’t understand, so it was better to go with that.

“If there’s a chance you might enter, I’m coming along. Besides, I’d like to see the school my baby’s attending!”

I couldn’t see anything to be gained from doing that, but if that was what she wanted, then whatever.

“All right, let’s go.”

“Yup!”

We locked up the shop and left. Mom linked her arm through mine as we stepped out onto the street.

“Tee hee. It’s not often we get a chance to go out together. I’m so excited!”

It was a little hard to walk with her glued to me like this...

“Right, Anos?” mom asked, merrier than usual.

“Uh... Right.”

Well, no harm done. A linked arm wasn’t going to impact my freedom in any way. Mom looked like she was having fun—there was no need to spoil it for her.

“By the way, I haven’t seen dad around recently,” I said.

Dad had returned after rushing out of the house the other day, but he had been constantly coming and going since then. I had assumed he was working on the demon sword, but was that really still the case?

“He’s been helping out at another blacksmith’s lately; they’ve been short on staff.”

Ah, I see. That was one way of getting to know one’s colleagues.

“He had better not cause them any trouble.”

Mom laughed. “Right? But he’s always done good work, so I’m sure he’ll be fine.”

I had never seen dad at work before, so it was hard to imagine based on his usual self.

“Come to think of it, Lay was the other student nominated from your class, right?”

We continued along at a leisurely pace while I answered mom’s questions about the tournament. Once we reached Delsgade, I showed mom to the arena.

“If you head straight, you’ll reach the seating area.”

“All right, thank you! Do your best, Anos dear.”

“Sure. Though I still don’t know if I’m entering.”

“Byeee! I’ll be cheering for you!” mom called.

She then left without hearing a word I’d said.

Because we had taken our time getting here, it was about time for the tournament to start. I was due to appear in the first match, so there wasn’t

much time left. Instead of heading to the waiting room, however, I turned and walked the other way.

Eventually, I arrived in the enchanted forest. The area that had been reduced to wasteland in the last team exam was already back to its former splendor. I strolled through the greenery until a meow came from overhead.

I looked up at the canopy to see a black cat perched on a branch. Light on its feet, the cat hopped down from the tree. It was Ivis.

“Is your investigation complete?” I asked.

The black cat—otherwise known as Ivis Necron—opened its mouth. “Two Demon Elders are involved in the Demon Sword Tournament: Gaios and Ydol.”

Those two, huh? Gaios’s memory had been erased and his body taken over by a subordinate of Avos Dilhevia. The same probably applied to Ydol.

“What is their aim?”

“Their aim can only be you, my liege. I believe they’ve set some kind of a trap.”

“If so, they’d have nothing to gain by disqualifying me.”

Ivis nodded. “They may have wanted to use the rules as a constraint to weaken you, my liege.”

Hmm. That made sense, but was it the most plausible scenario?

“Where are they now?”

“I’m afraid I don’t know. But they’re scheduled to visit for the finals tomorrow.”

I doubted they were coming just to watch. Were they planning something in anticipation of my involvement in the final round?

“What about Melheis?”

“I wasn’t able to catch wind of anything more. At the very least, he doesn’t seem involved in the orchestration of the Demon Sword Tournament. Nor has he shown any sign of plotting against you as of yet.”

So he was in the clear—well, when it came to this incident, at least. But there

was no way of knowing for sure.

“What about Lay?”

“Lay Grandsley’s mother, residing in the Lognorth Magic Hospital, is in poor health. Her life is at risk, and she’s responding unfavorably to healing magic. The hospital is barely able to keep her stable.”

So that was the reason for the long face. But that made things even more confusing. Why had he refused my help?

“What ails her?”

“According to the medical records, she suffers from spiritosis.”

Hmm. It wasn’t a condition I’d heard of. It hadn’t existed two thousand years ago, at least.

“What kind of ailment is it?”

“I cannot say. I’ve never heard of it myself. I tried looking into it, and it seems to be an extremely rare disease.”

So that was why she was receiving care at the best hospital in Dilhade.

“What else?”

“That’s all I could find.”

I would have to see his mother in person if I wanted to learn more. The unknown demon Ivis had previously mentioned also remained a mystery. At any rate, it would all have to wait until after today’s tournament.

“Good work. Continue looking into the rest.”

“As you wish.”

With that, Ivis disappeared into the forest, and I returned to the arena. Instead of making my way to the waiting room, though, I headed to the stands. I’d decided to wait things out up there.

“The first round of the Dilhade Demon Sword Tournament will now commence!” an owl’s voice announced from the sky. “Round one, match one! Entering the arena is Kurt Ludwell of the Lognorth Demon Sword Association!”

Excited cheers filled the stands as a long-haired man with gentle features appeared in the arena. At his waist was a thin, rapier-like demon sword.

“He’s here! The reigning champion of the tournament, Dilhade’s strongest swordsman, Kurt Ludwell!”

“I’ll never forget the shock of seeing his first fight!”

“Yeah. He was less than twenty years old back then, yet he knocked out veteran swordmasters faster than I’ve ever seen. It wasn’t even exhilarating—it was frightening.”

“Thirty years have gone by since, so I can’t wait to see how he’s improved. I have goosebumps at the thought...”

“Who’s the unlucky guy fighting Kurt in the first round?”

The spectators were all fired up in the face of such a celebrity.

“The Lognorth Demon Sword Association is a famous Royalist organization,” explained Misa, who had found me in the crowd.

“I see. Is that Emilia’s older or younger brother?”

“Her older brother.”

So all her family members were Royalists. I can’t say I was surprised.

“Up against him is Anos Voldigoad of the Demon King Academy Delsgade!” the owl called.

It had announced my presence, but no one appeared on the arena stage. After all, I was still here.

“Sorry... Because of us, you’re...”

“I want to avoid playing into Avos Dilhevia’s hands, is all.”

If I refrained from participating in the Demon Sword Tournament, Avos Dilhevia’s scheme would inevitably be jeopardized. And when that time came, he was more likely to slip up and expose himself.

How would he react to this move? I was sure he hadn’t expected me to run away. He would have devised everything under the assumption that the Demon King of Tyranny had too much pride to back down. After all, my true opponent

wasn't any of the tournament participants, but Avos Dilhevia himself. I wasn't foolish enough to mistake the two.

"Hey, his opponent isn't coming out."

"They're facing Kurt, you know? That's too much pressure for a student to handle. He probably ran away."

"But isn't Anos Voldigoad *that* guy? The one who the Unitarians insist is the Demon King of Tyranny."

"Ah, that's right. So he was just another phony."

"Ha! What a joke. Hybrids should just quit school and serve under royalty, where they belong."

"Honestly, it's so stupid. No matter how hard he tries, he'll never become a demon lord."

"Damn right. Both the Unitarians and this Anos kid are dreaming the impossible."

The spectators making all the noise seemed to be Royalists. They were going out of their way to speak loudly enough for the nearby white-uniform students to hear. The mixed-blood students had their fists clenched in frustration. They were surrounded by royals so had no choice but to bite their tongues.

To these students, I was probably a symbol of hope. If I didn't appear now, their frustration would never be dispelled.

But what did that matter? Did Avos Dilhevia think I would give in to such provocation and march out onto the stage?

"How do *you* know he won't become a demon lord?!" a familiar voice chirped angrily over them. My eyes darted in the direction of the voice.

It was mom.

"What do you want, lady? Don't you know? Only royalty can become demon lords. That's how it is," one of the spectators responded. He reached for mom's face, but she knocked him away brazenly.

"Anos will definitely become a demon lord!"

If mom had properly done her research on demon lords, she would have already learned that being royalty was the first condition to being assigned a position in Dilhade.

Nonetheless, she'd spoken without hesitation. She still didn't believe I was the Demon King of Tyranny. She didn't even know I was here. She just couldn't stay silent and watch as her precious child's dream was insulted.

"Anooos...!" someone gasped, tapping my shoulder.

I spun around to find dad panting for breath.

"Hah... Hah... I was looking for you... Here, take this..." He held out a sword. "It's a demon sword I forged with adamantine. Now you can participate too."

Activating my Magic Eyes, I noticed the mass of bandages under dad's clothes.

"Dad... Those wounds..."

"Oh, can you tell? Ha ha, that cliff the adamantine was on was pretty darn steep... I lost my footing and took a bit of a beating, but I'm fine! It's just a scratch."

It must have been painful even to lift an arm in his condition. Hammering the sword would have been agony. He had really completed this sword while in such a state, just for me...

"Go on, get going already. If you win this tournament, you can prove to everyone that even mixed-blood demons can make fine demon lords, right?"

Back before he'd left the house, I'd thought he was merely rambling on about nonsense as usual, but neither mom nor dad were completely empty-headed. They knew that mixed-blood demons couldn't become demon lords, yet they were prepared to support their son's dream in any way they could.

"Misa, inform Melheis that his arrangements won't be necessary."

"O-Okay..."

Withdrawing from the Demon Sword Tournament would be a better approach in dealing with Avos Dilhevia. That was certainly true. However...

What was I thinking, being so cautious towards a coward who wouldn't even

show himself in the open? There were more important things to consider.

“Anos Voldigoad! Are you here? If you don’t present yourself within the next ten seconds, you will be disqualified. Anos Voldigoad?” the circling owl called.

“I’m right here,” I called back from the stands, then leaped down onto the arena stage.

Although there had been a misunderstanding, it was the product of my own lies—that I wanted to become a demon lord and that I needed a demon sword to participate. I couldn’t tell mom and dad the truth, but I could at least change these lies into the truth. Even if there were things I couldn’t tell them, I still wanted to see my parents happy. There was nothing dishonest about those feelings.

Avos’s schemes were insignificant in comparison. No matter what kind of tricks he had up his sleeve, I would crush them all head-on.

“I was certain you’d fled, hero of the Unitarians,” Kurt said as he looked at me coldly.

“Hmm. I considered it. Did I keep you waiting?”

“Not at all. In light of your courage to appear before me, I shall forgive your tardiness.”

“Why, that’s very generous of you.”

He stared at me warily. There was no mistake—he was a formidable opponent. In terms of swordsmanship, he was probably better than even Gaios, the Demon Elder.

“Then allow me to apologize for wasting your time,” I said, assuming a battle stance with dad’s adamantite sword. “I’ll finish this within a minute.”

§ 19. A True Artisan

Kurt glanced coldly at my sword. “You intend to fight with that?”

“Is that a problem?”

“From what I can see, that isn’t even a demon sword. A block of metal with no magic running through it isn’t worth fighting.”

“Hmm. How about this, then?”

I drew a magic circle on the sword and cast Adesin. My vast magic coiled around the blade, which began to emit a chaotic glow like that of demon swords of the Mythical Age.

“If a sword has no power, I can simply supply it with my own.”

The Demon Sword Tournament forbade spells that harmed one’s opponents, but Adesin was permitted. The use of spells like this that imbued one’s blade with magic was common sense when handling a demon sword. By combining one’s magic with the magic of the blade, the sharpness of the sword was enhanced. Using a sword with no power of its own was definitely a disadvantage, but I could afford that much of a handicap.

“Before the first match commences,” the flying owl continued, “the tournament management committee has an announcement to make. There was a change of rules that has failed to be communicated. The use of Adesin and other weapon-enhancing spells are forbidden. The use of anything other than a sword to attack is also forbidden.”

A group of robed men appeared around the stage. There were sixteen of them.

“The match will be closely observed by the regulation committee. Any violation of the rules will be severely penalized and may potentially lead to disqualification, so be warned.”

So that’s what they were going with. Without the use of Adesin, the

adamantine sword was unable to break through the barrier surrounding Kurt's body—and was defenseless against incoming attacks.

I could easily break the barrier with my bare hands, but attacking with anything other than a sword was now prohibited. In other words, my chances of victory were now sealed. All that was left was for Kurt to sever my sword with his own.

From the very start, they had probably planned to change the rules based on my sword. Even if I had summoned Venuzdonoa here, they would have found a reason to ban its use.

"Dear me, father's preparations never fail to impress," Kurt said. "I, for one, don't need such tricks to win. Well, the result will be the same either way, so no matter."

Kurt drew his sword. It was no ordinary weapon—the blade was transparent, with an edge undulating like flowing water.

Excited murmurs rose from the audience.

"So that's Eisias, the water demon sword..."

"The sword has no fixed form and can't be destroyed by any other blade. Even still, its cutting edge is to be feared."

"That metal sword will be shattered the moment it makes contact..."

The owl's voice rose once more.

"And now, for round one, match one of the Dilhade Demon Sword Tournament! Begin!" it exclaimed, giving the signal to start the match.

Kurt stepped smoothly forward, sweeping in like a tide. He was before me in the blink of an eye, thrusting Eisias forward.

In the span of a single breath, his sword was thrust three times. The next breath, it was thrust nine. After that came twenty-seven. His sword divided into countless blades of water, attacking me from every direction.

"There it is! Kurt's secret technique, Aquafang Rapid Strike!"

"It's over! No one in the world can dodge that!"

“Take that, you half-breed!”

Hmm. What a sluggish attack.

“What the...?!” Kurt spluttered as I slid past.

“Is that what you consider a secret technique?” I asked, looking down at him.

“My classmate strikes faster than that.”

“You may have evaded it once...but don’t push your luck!”

I used my adamantite sword to block his upwards swing. The blades rang as they clashed.

“Huh...?!” Kurt exclaimed wordlessly as shock flooded his face. There was no way a sword with no power could halt the blade of a demon sword.

The crowd descended into uproar.

“H-Hey, refs! Are you even watching?! He must be cheating!”

“That’s right! There’s no way Eias would slice through a piece of junk like that!”

“Cheater! Cheater!”

“Damn this half-breed! Resorting to such cowardice! Disqualify him!”

Foul chants of “Cheater! Cheater!” filled the stands as the crowd yelled at the top of their lungs.

The sixteen wardens strained their Eyes with all the magic they could muster and focused on my sword. But no sooner had they cast their Eyes on it than they began to panic.

“Wh-What’s the meaning of this? He’s not using any magic!” one cried.

“Impossible! How could he defend against Eias without magic—”

“But I don’t feel any at all!”

“That can’t be! No magic exists without leaving a trace of it!”

“Is this...that sword’s power...?”

“Nonsense! Find it! There has to be a trick to it!”

Hmm. How futile.

I was currently using Najila, a spell that concealed any and all traces of magic. By superimposing Adesin and Najila, even a demon of the Mythical Age would struggle to detect the truth. The demons of this era stood no chance.

Without proof, they wouldn't be able to accuse me of cheating. And as long as Melheis sided with the Unitarians, they couldn't afford to overdo things or the tables would turn to their disadvantage.

"Hey... The wardens aren't suspending the match..."

"Does that mean he really isn't using magic?"

"That sword... At a glance, it doesn't look like anything special...but perhaps it's just as powerful as Eisias."

Kurt's blade expanded like a rushing torrent of water. He was probably channeling all his power into Eisias, but the sword in my hand didn't budge. I continued bearing the force of his blade without any difficulty.

"How...?" Kurt murmured. "That sword has no magic power, and yet..."

"Indeed, there's no magic in my blade." I pushed against Kurt's sword with my own, forcing him backwards. "Instead, it's filled with my father's hopes. The sword dad forged with all his heart will not be broken by the likes of you."

"Ridiculous..."

I grinned tauntingly. "Don't you know, Kurt? A sword forged by the heart of a true artisan contains something other than magic."

I swung my sword the rest of the way, overpowering Kurt and flinging his back. Eisias soared from his hand and flew in an arc as he caught himself, stabbing deep into the arena floor.

"Did you hear what he just said...?" the crowd whispered.

"A sword from the heart... A will that strengthens a sword... Is such a thing possible?"

"No, it can't be, but...what other explanation is there? There's no other way to explain the phenomenon we're seeing before our very eyes!"

“A true artisan capable of forging a sword on par with Eisias... Just who is this guy’s father?!”

Hmm. My bluff seemed to have done the trick.

“It appears you’ve forced my hand,” Kurt said as he glared fiercely. “I was planning on saving this for the finals, but allow me to give you an early preview. This is the result of devoting my entire being to the sword—the unification of demon and sword, the essence of the Sword of Kurt...”

Eisias’s blade disappeared. Kurt braced the sword’s empty hilt.

“Hmm. That sounds interesting; however...”

He lowered his center of gravity, shifting all his weight onto one foot. “*Sword of Kurt, Hidden Ar—*”

The next moment, Kurt’s body was sliced open by countless slashes.

“Wha— Gah...!”

He fell to his knees uncomprehendingly. Then, unable to stand unaided, he grabbed Eisias and used it as a cane to support himself back to his feet.

“It’s been a minute,” I said.

Eisias shattered into pieces, sending Kurt tumbling face-first onto the stone. He crawled along the ground, fingers reaching for the remnants of his demon sword.

“Wh-What...did you...? Did I...of all people...lose?”

Kurt still hadn’t realized what had happened. The answer was simple, really.

I walked over to him and dealt the finishing blow.

“That can’t be!” the audience yelled. “His sword may have been made by a true artisan, but he defeated Kurt in a single minute!”

“Kurt left the last tournament without a scratch...”

“I came to see Kurt show off his terrifying growth in the three decades since the last tournament...”

“He wasn’t even given a chance to reveal his hidden art... He was completely

overpowered...”

“What *is* that guy? If he belongs to the Demon King Academy, then he’s still a student. Just who the hell is he?!”

The abrupt end of the match left the spectators nothing but confused.

“Hmm. A blunder on my part. It seems I should have let him show off his so-called hidden art instead of dwelling on the time.”

§ 20. Lord Anos Cheer Song No. Two

“Kurt Ludwell’s demon sword has been destroyed. The winner of round one, match one is Anos Voldigoad!” the owl overhead called, announcing my victory.

The stands, however, remained silent. Royals dominated the audience, after all. There was no way they would accept that a hybrid—who shouldn’t have even been able to enter—had won the match. Well, it wasn’t as though I wanted their cheers.

I turned on my heels to head back to the waiting room.

Just then, familiar voices rose from the audience.

“That’s my Anos! My little genius!”

“Good job, my boy! The rest will be a breeze for you!”

It was mom and dad. Their cheers were followed by those of the mixed-blood demons.

“What should we do?” a girl cried. “The match finished before we could sing our cheer song!”

“Lord Anos is so strong, we didn’t have a chance to sing!”

“Let’s sing it now!”

“But he’s already won! What would we be cheering for if we sang it now?!”

“Here goes—*Lord Anos Cheer Song No. Two: O Praise Be to Lord Anos’s Sword!*”

“Hey, are you even listening?!”

“One, two... One, two, three, four!”

“Fine... Let’s sing to celebrate Lord Anos’s victory!”

The fan union girls sounded the drums and wind instruments that they’d brought with them into the stands and began blasting out the melody to their song.

“I’m on top, and you’re below!”

“Instant slaughter, overthrow! Whew! Ahah!”

“I’m on top, and you’re below!”

“Easy victory, easy foe! Ooh! Ahah!”

“O praise be to Lord Anos’s sword!”

“His prey sprawls across the arena bed!”

“Lord Anos’s sword fills them toe to head!”

“Even the toughest of fellows takes just one shot!”

“To be filled up, filled up, filled up a lot!”

“I’m on top, and you’re below!”

“Spurt to death, spurt to go...whew! Ahah!”

“I’m on top, and you’re below!”

“Oh, oh, oh, the relief! Ooh! Ahah!”

“Go on, go on, gasp for it! Praise be to his splendiferous swooooooord!”

Such a wasted vibrato...but it was rather refreshing.

The Royalists that had shouted about how I couldn’t become a demon lord were all hanging their heads in shame. Through my victory, I’d demonstrated such a clear gap in ability, there was nothing they could say that wouldn’t add to their own humiliation.

Despite how unintended their actions had been, the fan union’s song mocked my opponents perfectly. Even I couldn’t have composed a better anthem. Above all else, it was enjoyable to listen to—the fan union girls possessed a rare talent.

I left the arena, passed through the waiting room, and made my way to the stands. Upon my arrival, mom’s voice immediately caught my attention.

“Right, and so I was thinking—how about lyrics like this? Let me sing them for you,” she offered. “*Ahem*—Little Anos’s sword aims to conquer all, oh, oh yes! The tip of his blade leaves suspicious white stains; oh, what a mess! Dom—

Dom— Domination! Whew! Ahah!”

Hmm. Those were some rather terrible lyrics. However, the fan union girls beside mom were gazing at her in admiration.

“A-As expected of Lord Anos’s mother!”

“Amazing! Marvelous! I’ve never heard such a beautiful voice!”

“Yes! Such bold yet delicate lyrics... They convey the turbulence of Lord Anos’s life so vividly, I can’t stop my tears...!”

“W-Waaah... I’m so t-tooouched...”

The fan union was overcome with emotion. I personally didn’t see what was so moving about these lyrics, but I supposed that came down to the two-thousand-year generational gap.

“If it’s all right with you, ma’am, would you like to come visit the fan union sometime in the future? We’d love to have you as an external trainer for our songs!”

“Y-Yes, please come!”

The girls all bowed their heads.

Hmm. I had an intensely bad feeling about that offer. If I didn’t stop them here, things would get out of hand later.

“Apologies,” I interrupted. “Mom’s normally too busy running the store.”

“Ah, Lord Anos! A-Awaaah!”

The fan union girls shrieked, stumbling back three steps before bowing to me.

“W-Well if Lord Anos says so, then... Eek!”

“We’re so sorry for stepping out of line! Eek!”

It would be preferable if they chose between making a fuss and humbling themselves.

“It’s all right, Anos, dear,” mom chimed in. “I can close the store and visit from time to time, if you’ll have me?”

“O-Of course! Thank you very much! Yay!” one of the girls shrieked, taking

mom's hand and shaking it vigorously.

A tinge of uneasiness shot through me at mom's suggestive smile. "I'll make sure the academy allows you to be yourself," she assured me. "Just leave it to your mother! Yeah?"

Hmm. Please desist from that expression that says, "I'll lay the groundwork so that you can come out to everyone about Lay."

"The second match of round one will now commence. Entering the arena is Madra Shenson of the Ayneas Training School!"

A man entered the arena. He looked almost beastly in appearance, with a body covered head to toe in scars.

"Isn't that Madra the Tempest? The fastest swordsman in Dilhade... The runner-up of the last tournament?"

"Yeah...but doesn't he look really different?"

"Apparently he shut himself inside the Granhelia Underground Labyrinth to clear his disgrace of losing to Kurt."

"Granhelia?! Don't they say it's a perilous task just to make it past the first floor?"

"Yeah. Rumor is, he went down to the two hundred fiftieth floor and stayed there for twenty years."

"What? That's insane..."

"What we see now are the remnants of a man who drove himself to madness seeking strength. I suppose you could say he's surpassed Kurt in a way."

Oh? That brought back some memories. I had once taken a stroll through Granhelia because I'd been curious how deep it descended. Turns out, it had a total of two thousand five hundred floors. This Madra fellow must be quite formidable to make it through even one tenth of that.

"His opponent will be Lay Grandsley of the Lognorth Demon Sword Association!" the owl broadcast.

Ah, so it was Lay's turn. But had the owl really just said "the Lognorth Demon

Sword Association”?

“Lay Grandsley... The Demon Swordmaster, huh?”

“Yeah, one of the Cohort of Chaos.”

“He’s a good rookie, but he’ll be no match for Madra.”

“In another ten years or so, he may stand a chance. For now, though, he just doesn’t have the experience.”

“But who’d have guessed that the Demon Swordmaster’s part of the Lognorth Demon Sword Association?”

“That makes him one of us.”

Lay entered the arena. At his waist was Initio, the formula-cutting demon sword he had lent Misa during the team exam.

“And now, for match two, round one of the Dilhade Demon Sword Tournament! Begin!” came the signal to start the match.

Madra and Lay faced one another and began their slow walk forward. They stopped within a fraction of a sword’s reach.

“Draw it,” Madra commanded in a deep voice.

Lay replied with his usual refreshing tone. “I’m good like this.”

“This isn’t a threat. I’m sure you’ve heard of the Gale Blade Leflecia, the wind-cloaked demon sword. Once drawn from its sheath, the blade will disperse into a swift wind. I’ll give you three seconds. If you don’t draw your sword within that time, you will die.” Madra glared at Lay. “Three.”

Lay didn’t move.

“Two.”

Lay still didn’t move.

“One.”

Madra touched his demon sword.

“Die.”

He drew his sword faster than the eye could follow, slashing at Lay’s neck. No

sooner than he had, than he was gaping in shock.

“Wha...”

Instead of Lay being immediately beheaded, Madra’s demon sword had snapped cleanly in two. By the time the tip had reached Lay’s neck, the blade had been severed from its hilt.

“When...did you draw...?” Madra gasped.

Lay’s sword sat in its sheath.

“After you did,” Lay responded.

“You drew your sword after I drew mine, yet you still surpassed the Gale Blade Leflecia...”

Not only had Madra failed to register the moment Lay had drawn his sword, but he had also missed its return to its sheath.

Lay grinned. “I have a friend who can move faster than that with a tree branch.”

“With...a branch...?”

Lay turned his back and began walking away in undisputable victory.

“Madra Shenson’s demon sword has been destroyed. The winner of round one, match two is Lay Grandsley!”

The crowd erupted in mutual surprise.

“Wow! He took out Madra in an instant!”

“Did anyone see him draw his sword? When did he even move?!”

“I was getting kinda worried when Kurt was defeated, but we still have a promising guy on our side!”

“Right, and he’s from the Cohort of Chaos. Maybe he’s the Demon King of Tyranny.”

The girl behind me watched with a gloomy expression as Lay exited the arena. The Lognorth Demon Sword Association was a Royalist organization. It was peculiar for Lay to be affiliated with them.

“Does it bother you, Misa?” I asked.

She nodded silently.

“Then let’s go and find him.”

“Huh?”

“Come. If you’re going to make a face like that, you may as well ask him directly.”

I started walking with Misa following close behind.

§ 21. Message

We waited patiently outside the waiting room door until it opened to reveal Lay.

“Hey,” I said.

He looked between Misa and me, then offered us a troubled smile. “I was hoping you’d look the other way.”

“I considered it. No matter the circumstances, you decided not to rely on me—it would be tactless for me to meddle. That aside, I cannot ignore the plight of one of my followers.”

Misa stepped in front of me. She stared at Lay for a moment, then opened her mouth with resolution. “Lay, did the Royalists say something to you?”

“Something like that. Maybe they’ve offered me enough money to last the rest of my life, and maybe they’ve offered to endorse me as a demon lord.”

“I can’t believe you’d care for such things.”

Lay smiled. “You think too highly of me. Be careful. There are lots of people in this world who say nice things but act like scum.”

His mystifying words left Misa unconvinced. “I know that... But I don’t believe you’re one of them.”

“You shouldn’t trust someone you’ve just met,” Lay said, still smiling softly. It seemed he had no intention of speaking the truth.

Unable to find the words to press him further, Misa bit down on her lip in frustration.

“The Lognorth Magic Hospital was established at Elio Ludwell’s own expense,” I recalled. “In other words, it’s a Royalist institution.”

“Indeed it is,” Lay replied, his smile unfaltering.

“Is your mother in good health?”

“Yup. Like I said the other day, it’s nothing to worry about. She’s all better now.”

“I’d like to meet her sometime.”

“She’ll be discharged from the hospital soon. I’ll introduce you to her afterwards.”

Hmm. I see.

“Come to think of it, the tournament pairings have us meeting in the finals,” I said.

“It’s a shame we won’t be able to fight to our hearts’ content, though.” Lay looked at my sword.

“Oh, you may not be able to detect any magic from it, but this sword was forged by a true artisan,” I assured him. “It won’t fall behind your own sword when it comes to power. Come at me with all you’ve got.”

Lay chuckled. “Is that all, then?”

“Yes.”

He began walking in the direction of the stands.

“Um, Lay...”

“Sorry, Misa, but I’m a Royalist now. I can’t get along with you anymore,” he said as he passed, leaving us behind.

Or so I’d thought before he paused midway. “Oh, there’s one thing I forgot, Anos.”

“What is it?”

He replied without turning back. “I’m going to kill you.”

I smirked. “If you wish to kill me, you had better be prepared to die.”

“That isn’t a threat. It’s life or death, after all.”

“Oh? Then let me test that resolution of yours.”

The moment I’d finished speaking, I vanished, then reappeared behind Lay.

“I can see you, Anos.” He spun around and swung Initio.

To defend myself, I cast anti-magic and a barrier over my left arm, but the formula was easily slashed apart and the magic scattered. The demon sword's pure-white blade cut into my left arm, drawing a stream of blood.

"Hmm. You managed to scratch me. I'm impressed."

"I was aiming to take your head and your arm clean off..." Lay choked, coughing up blood. My right arm was embedded in his chest.

"And I was aiming to crush your heart, but it seems your body is particularly sturdy."

Misa began yelling, baffled by the exchange. "L-Lord Anos! Lay! You didn't have to start fighting here...!"

She looked extremely worried, but whether she liked it or not, we'd be facing one another in the finals.

"Don't worry; I was just ensuring his resolution. No matter the opponent, I will show no mercy. If you were expecting compassion on the grounds of friendship," I said, turning to address Lay. "I would have finished you off right here."

"I'm the one who's relieved. If you're going to fight seriously, I can have at you without hesitation."

I looked down at him with a smirk, to which he returned a cool smile.

"See you later, then," he said.

"Yeah. At the finals."

Lay left for the stands.

"Lord Anos..."

"It seems someone's put a collar on him."

Misa looked at me, her eyes wide.

"I had to touch him directly to confirm it—there's a magic item implanted in him."

"You confirmed it...in that brief moment?"

“That was my intent.”

My Magic Eyes could see through most things with a glance, but the article within Lay was of considerable power. It was synchronized with his magic, which made it particularly hard to spot.

“But when did you notice?”

“Lay was the one who gave us the hint: that it’s life or death. I took it to mean his life is at risk even before he tries to kill me. I could only assume his actions are being controlled. If he tries to seek help from me, he could end up dead.”

Lay was most likely being monitored via a spell or another magic item. It would be best to assume that if he sought help from anyone, the people controlling him would activate the item embedded within him and kill him.

“He did say that, but how was that enough to figure it out...?”

“Before that, he said he couldn’t fight to his heart’s content. He even said he was going to kill me. Lay’s the type to cut down his opponents without batting an eye—his attempt to provoke me was uncharacteristic. Not to mention that he left his chest wide open when he swung at me. It was like he was telling me to search him.”

As a result, I had discovered the magic item within him.

For Lay, offering us clues would have been a risky move. He had had to get me to notice while avoiding the detection of whomever was monitoring him. Slipping up would have cost him his life.

“I’m shocked. It just looked to me like you two were having a falling out... You’re both amazing.”

“Oh, this was a regular occurrence in days past.”

Two thousand years ago, tricks had been much more elaborate.

“Is it the work of the Royalists?”

“That seems the most reasonable assumption.”

Either that, or this was the work of Avos Dilhevia.

“They must be really strong if they can plant an item in Lay’s body, right?”

That was a possibility. However—

“His mother is probably involved.”

“The woman in the hospital?”

“Yeah. I asked him about her, figuring she was involved in all this. His answer was probably a message for me to help her.”

If both his mother and his own body had been taken hostage, everything made sense. Since he had sought my help in such a risky situation, there was no way I could possibly ignore him.

“What would you do in this scenario?” I asked Misa.

“Controlling people’s hearts like that is unforgivable,” she replied, her voice brimming with anger. “Just because they’re royal doesn’t mean they should get away with whatever they want—they need to be taught a lesson.”

“In that case, come with me. I don’t know who’s behind this, but they laid a hand on a friend. I won’t let them get away with it.”

“Right.”

Just as I was about to head for the magic hospital, I remembered something and paused. “Come to think of it, the second round’s about to start.”

If I recalled correctly, only the finals would be held the next day.

“Hmm. Wait a bit. I have to clean up the competition.”

§ 22. Spiritosis

I breezed my way through the Demon Sword Tournament without incident.

Exercising Najila at all times required a considerable reserve of magic, but all my consecutive opponents were weaker than Kurt from the first round. The average match time was less than three seconds, so there was no fear of my magic being depleted.

“Noilia’s sword has been destroyed. The winner is Anos Voldigoad!”

Cheers rose from one corner of the stands. It was the members of the fan union.

Simultaneously, another group of spectators stirred.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me. He really won in an instant...”

“A half-breed strong enough to make it to the finals unscathed... I can’t believe it.”

“At this rate, all that’s left is to rely on the Demon Swordmaster!”

“Yeah, Lay Grandsley’s just as untouchable. He won’t let us down!”

The Royalists continued yammering behind my back as I headed for the waiting room. Inside, I found Misa waiting for me.

“Are we heading off?” she asked.

“Yeah, just as soon as I’ve had a word with mom and dad.”

I left the waiting room and headed for the stands, where I ran into dad on his way out.

“Ah, Anos! I’m just on my way back to work. I’ll see you at the finals tomorrow though, son!”

“If you’re busy, you don’t have to come in person. You can watch it via the magicast.”

The Demon Sword Tournament was broadcast across Dilhade using Limnet.

Roughly half the country possessed magicast receivers, so it was possible to watch the event without even visiting Delsgade. This was another probable reason the Royalists didn't want a hybrid like me winning.

"Don't worry, Anos. Even if I'm busy, I'll definitely find the time to come. It's your big moment in the spotlight, after all!"

Dad slapped me on the shoulder and winced. It seemed he had forgotten his own injury.

"Ow...!" he grunted.

Good grief, he really had pushed himself too far this time. I drew a magic circle over dad's body and cast Ent. Particles of light gathered over his wounds.

"How's that?"

"O-Ooh...! It's healed! That's my boy! It doesn't hurt one bit! Look! I can move around so much now."

Dad showed off his recovery by flailing around in every direction. Then...

"Whoa!" Dad tripped over his own feet, hitting his head against a nearby stone wall. He crouched down, cradling his head. "Ouch... Sorry, could you heal me one more time...?"

"It'll heal by itself."

A bump to the head wasn't a wound worth wasting magic on.

"Oh... So you're right. It's all better." Dad stood back up. "See you later then!"

Waving cheerfully, he continued on his way.

"Sorry your dad was in such a rush," mom said as she joined me. "It wasn't easy for him to make the time to come today."

"What's he working on?" I asked.

"Um, well... He told me to keep this a secret," mom said, grinning. "But we actually didn't have the means to forge adamantine at our place, so your dad borrowed the equipment from an acquaintance of his who owns a nearby workshop. In exchange, he's doing some work for them."

So that's why he hadn't been at home recently.

“We knew you were too clever to ask us for a sword yourself, not wanting to cause us any trouble and all. Your dad said you’d stop him if you knew about it, so he made the sword in secret.”

Hmm. This was a complete misunderstanding. Yet another one in fact, but...oh well. I supposed I could attribute my win to dad’s sword in my victory speech.

“You can’t tell your dad I let it slip, okay?”

“Sure. Just so you know, I’m going to head off now that my matches are over.”

“Huh? You’re not going to watch the rest?”

“I’ve got some business to attend to. Besides, Lay’s going to win.”

“I get it. How about I hold on to that sword for you?” mom suggested, pointing at dad’s creation. “It’ll get in the way of whatever you need to do, right?”

“No, really. I’ll be fine.”

“But it’s heavy. You need to rest up for tomorrow,” mom said, practically snatching the sword away from me. “It’s okay. I know you need this sword for the finals tomorrow. I’ll protect it no matter what!”

It was true that backup swords weren’t permitted in the tournament, but there was no doubt Avos Dilhevia had something planned for the finals. He wouldn’t get me disqualified so early on.

“There’s no need to be so worried.”

“Really?” Mom hugged the adamantine sword to her chest. She wasn’t giving up.

“I’ll entrust it to you, then.”

“Okay! I’ll escort it home safely.”

Thinking about it, Misha and Sasha were probably somewhere in the arena, but I supposed they didn’t need to come.

“See you later,” I said to mom, turning to leave.

As I walked away, I heard girlish voices ringing out behind me.

“Excuse us, ma’am! We’d like some advice on our newest cheer song!”

“Sure thing! Let’s hear it,” mom replied gleefully.

She seemed to be getting on well with the fan union members. What kind of song would they come up with next?

“Thanks for waiting,” I said to Misa, who was standing by the exit.

“No worries.”

She touched my hand, and I cast Gatom. Our destination was the vicinity of the Lognorth Magic Hospital.

“What’s the plan?” Misa asked.

“Let’s see... There are numerous options, but how about you use that spell from the team exam?”

“You mean Fuska? The spirit spell to turn into rain?”

“Yeah. I’ll lend you the magic. Cast it as widely as you can.”

“All right.”

I cast Gyze to link myself to Misa, then supplied her with sufficient magic.

Dark clouds gathered over the entire city, and droplets of rain began to fall. My magic was flooded into Fuska, and the rain and fog wrapped around us. If we opened the hospital door in this state, we would appear as faint mist.

Thanks to the effects of the spell, we marched right into the hospital without a soul spotting us.

As we walked, I used my Eyes of Farsight to check the patient list behind the reception desk. There, I found the name Sheila Grandsley—Lay’s mother. She was noted as hospitalized in a special room ten floors below ground level.

We proceeded down the stairs until we reached the correct floor. So far, we’d seen nothing unusual. I opened the door without hesitation, revealing a ward filled with magic circles for treatment. There was a hospital bed in the center occupied by a sleeping woman. That must be Sheila.

Misa and I walked up to her.

“Her body...” Misa whispered.

Sheila’s body was so transparent, she looked as though she could vanish at any moment. She showed no signs of waking—in fact, she had so little vitality, she seemed as good as dead.

“Hmm. So this is spiritosis.”

I touched Sheila’s head with the tip of my finger, using my Eyes to examine her condition. But no matter how deep I looked into the abyss, I couldn’t identify a cause for her sickness. There was no discord in her magic—it was merely weak.

Something was strange, though. With this little magic, it was only natural for a person’s condition to deteriorate. Yet from what I could see, Sheila was currently in a stable condition.

“Can you tell what’s wrong with her...?”

“Her condition resembles the weakening of one in old age, but...”

Her body was normal. It merely seemed like she had reached the end of her life span. But she didn’t look anywhere near that kind of age.

Wait, was she—

“I see. So that’s why it’s called spiritosis.”

“What do you mean?”

“This woman is a half spirit, half demon, just like you.”

Misa’s eyes widened in surprise. “But Lay’s a royal, right...?”

“His birth parents may not be his caregivers.”

“That’s...possible, I guess...”

“This disease involves the spirit part of her. Spirits are rather complex beings. The logic of demonkind doesn’t apply to them.”

There was no other reason my Eyes would fail to identify the cause.

“Come to think of it,” Misa recalled, “Lay once said something about how half

spirits don't live very long. He said it was strange that I was so energetic after using spirit magic."

The conversation they'd had in my garden, huh?

"Do you have any idea why?" I asked.

"No... I may be half spirit, but I don't know anything about spirits... I'm sorry."

With his mother taken hostage, Lay must have had a magic item embedded in his body. Judging by the situation, he had to follow the Royalists' orders in exchange for his mother's treatment.

But how were they maintaining her condition? From what I could see, none of the magic circles around her were having any effect on her condition.

Lay wouldn't have placed his trust in the Royalists blindly. This hospital must have possessed the means of treating spiritosis. In other words, a demon there was knowledgeable about spirits—a demon from the Mythical Age, most likely.

Now, what was I to do? As long as I saved his mother first, the rest could be resolved by removing the magic item from Lay's body. In order to do that though, I first had to find out more about his mother's treatment—actually, there was one other thing I could try first.

"Misa, I have a favor to ask of you."

"Sure. Whatever I can do."

"I want you to question Lay for more details. Especially about his mother. If I can pinpoint a time in her past, I can use it as an origin for Rivide. That way, I can rewind time and heal her without knowing anything about the disease itself. Of course, one mistake and both you and Lay will end up in grave danger..."

Misa nodded immediately, having already strengthened her resolve. "I'll do my best."

§ 23. Lay's Past

After some time, the door to the ward opened, and Lay appeared. He came inside and headed straight for the bed, where his mother was sleeping.

"Hi, mom," he murmured. "I won today. I've made it into the finals." He gazed down at her still body. "Will you wait until tomorrow for me? I promise I'll save you."

There was no sign of his usual smile on his face. He was looking at his mother sadly.

"What's happening tomorrow?" Misa asked.

Lay glanced sharply in the direction of the voice. The faint mist in the corner of the room shifted, revealing Misa at its center. As soon as Lay recognized her, his expression softened.

"I was wondering where the rain came from," he said. "I never expected you'd come here, though."

"I just couldn't accept that you would become a Royalist of your own volition."

Lay smiled that familiar smile that made his thoughts so hard to read. "I'm actually a habitual liar."

"Liars don't call themselves liars..."

Unaffected by Misa's words, Lay continued. "Did you come here alone?"

"That's right."

Of course, that was the real lie. I was still hidden by Misa's Fuska as long as I didn't move.

"Do you mind keeping this a secret from Anos, then?"

"Are you sure? Doesn't that mean you're being threatened into not telling him?"

“You think so?”

“I believe he can help you.”

“The moment he knows, my mother and I will be beyond help.”

There it was. So he was being threatened after all.

“What do you mean?”

“As you can see, my mother is sick. She has a disease called spiritosis that only affects half spirits. Because it’s such a rarity, normal doctors can’t cure her.”

Misa looked at Sheila. “What kind of disease is it?”

“They say it starts with the deterioration of one’s source and magic, which then worsens over time until the sufferer disappears completely.”

“Then how is it treated?”

Lay shook his head. “If I knew, I wouldn’t have joined the Royalists.”

“Can this hospital really heal her?”

“Ever since she became afflicted with the disease, her magic grew weaker by the day. But her condition stabilized once she was admitted here. They told me they can cure her. I have no choice but to believe them.”

If they possessed the means to stabilize her condition, then they surely knew what was causing the sickness. That made it reasonable to assume that they also knew how to cure it.

“There are several conditions I must fulfill in exchange for them curing my mother. The first is to fight Anos in the Demon Sword Tournament. They implanted a sword pact in my body, so if I defy them, I’ll die. If I die, they’ll have no reason to keep my mother alive.”

A sword pact, huh? A magic item like that would be even harder to break than Zecht. Doing so would destroy one’s very source, resulting in certain death.

“Telling this to Anos would also break the pact.”

“Was it okay for you to tell me...?”

“I trust you won’t tell anyone else.”

“Huh...?”

“That was a lie.”

Caught by surprise, Misa allowed Lay to approach her. She tried to disappear into the mist again, but he used Initio to sever the formula of the spell. Fuska’s effect ended, the mist dissipated, and the rain outside ceased.

With the spell successfully halted, Lay looked around the room. “You really did come alone...”

He must have been checking whether anyone else had been hidden with Fuska. Or rather, he’d been checking for me specifically. And while Fuska had indeed worn off, I was still invisible thanks to the effects of Lynel. On top of that, I had erased all traces of magic with Najila, so I was all but undetectable.

The reason I’d had Misa use Fuska was to give Lay something to erase, luring him into a false sense of security.

“Right then.”

Lay grabbed both of Misa’s arms and pinned them together, removing a jagged dagger from his breast pocket. Without batting an eye, he swung the dagger down at Misa. She squeezed her eyes shut, but the dagger didn’t make contact with her—Lay had stabbed it into her shadow.

“Sorry. I’m afraid you’ll have to wait here until the finals are over tomorrow.”

Misa tried to fade into mist, but she couldn’t use Fuska with her shadow pinned to the ground.

“What is this...?”

“It’s called a shadow-stitching dagger. It can restrict a person’s movement by sewing down their shadow. You can now only move within the range of that shadow, and magic that makes you disappear is a no-go.”

As I’d expected. There must be a condition that required him to silence anyone who learned of his circumstances. Well, at least it wasn’t a requirement to kill them. A pact made with too harsh conditions would result in unnecessary deaths—which could potentially even worsen the situation for the Royalists. They’d probably decided to leave the killing part up to Lay.

“There’s anti-magic in this room that blocks transmissions. You won’t be able to use Leaks to call for help.”

“The Unitarians will question my disappearance and come to rescue me.”

“Sure. But they won’t make it in time for tomorrow’s finals. That’s all I need.”

Misa thought for a moment. “What are you planning to do?” she asked.

“Sorry, I can’t tell you.”

Telling her would breach the pact too, huh?

“Who’s the one making you do all this?”

“Demon Lord Elio. As far as I know, anyway.”

Elio was a puppet. In all probability, this was the work of the unknown demon running the hospital. Given the circumstances, it was safe to conclude that that demon was somehow connected to Avos Dilhevia.

Lay walked over to the side of the room, grabbed a chair, and brought it over to Misa. She watched him with a questioning look as he set it down beside her and offered her a thin smile. “Sit,” he seemed to be saying.

Misa sat down quietly.

“Sorry for dragging you into this,” Lay said.

Misa laughed softly. “I wouldn’t say that.”

This time, Lay was the one to offer the questioning look.

“You were the one dragged into this—into the dispute between Unitarians and Royalists. That’s why I’m the one who should be sorry.”

Lay’s eyes widened. “I never thought I’d be apologized to after doing such a thing.”

“That’s because you’re a good person, Lay.”

“That’s not true. I’m a liar, after all,” he said jokingly, flashing her a smile.

“And if the Unitarians weren’t feuding with the Royalists, my mother would already be dead.”

He had a point there. Sheila’s condition was only being maintained thanks to

the demons in charge of this facility. Without the strife between the two factions—without Avos Dilhevia—Sheila wouldn't have received treatment in order for them to control Lay.

Misa looked at him sadly. "Can I ask you a question?"

"I can't tell you what I know, unfortunately."

"No, I want to ask about your mother."

"My mother?" He seemed surprised. "There's nothing to gain from it."

"Which means you can answer, right?" Misa grinned.

With a wry smile, Lay conceded. "You're a strange one."

"She's not your real mother, is she...?"

"No. I was born into the Yvesta family."

"That family of distinguished magic users?"

"Yes. The secret magic of the Yvesta family is passed down from generation to generation. The children of the family are able to use that magic from birth. But for some reason, I wasn't able to inherit it."

The inheritance of magic was a type of source magic. It involved sharing part of one's source with one's child, but on the rare occasion, magic succession could fail. The most common cause of failure was the child's source already being influenced by the effect of a stronger source magic—for example, the reincarnation spell Syrica.

"Because I corrupted the magic of our ancestors, I was deemed worthless and thrown out."

"When did that happen?"

"When I was around five years old. Honestly, I didn't know left from right, and I had no idea what to do. My hometown was controlled by the Yvesta family, so no one wanted to help me. I suppose the Yvestas expected me to starve like that. I wandered the city for several days before I collapsed from hunger. That was when someone reached out to me."

"Your mother..."

Lay nodded. “She brought me home, fed me a hot meal, and offered me a bed to sleep in. After that, she let me live with her. Obviously, that angered the Yvesta family, and they threatened her place of employment. Despite that, my mother chose me—we both fled for a city to go where the Yvesta family couldn’t reach us.”

“Your mother’s a kind person, isn’t she?”

Lay smiled with fondness. “When I got older, I asked her why she’d saved me.”

“What did she say?”

“She told me she’d been thrown away by her father as well. Her father was a Royalist, and her mother was a spirit. I’m sure you can figure out the reason she was discarded, can’t you?”

Misa nodded sadly. Any Royalist with a child of mixed blood would be exiled from the group immediately. Lay’s mother had probably been discarded so that her father could protect himself.

“She said that was why she couldn’t ignore a discarded child like me.”

Misa nodded quietly, waiting for him to continue.

“My mother raised me as if I were her own child. But she was born with a weak constitution. Her magic and source were slowly deteriorating without an identifiable reason. She was finally diagnosed with spiritosis and hasn’t woken up for a whole year now.”

So her power had gradually decreased. Such occurrences were usually the result of an abnormality in the source or paths of magic within the body, but Sheila appeared to be completely normal.

“I went around visiting various magic hospitals until I finally ended up here.”

Just when he’d thought he had found a place that could stabilize her condition, they had offered him a deal. Timing-wise, it had happened the day Misha and I had gone out together.

“That’s unforgivable...” Misa muttered. Her indignation was as clear as day. “Taking someone’s mother hostage, threatening them into doing their dirty

work... It's absolutely unforgivable!"

Lay looked at her with a troubled smile. "Thank you for getting angry on my behalf," he said, turning and heading for the door. "I'm sorry."

He left the ward without looking back.

§ 24. Sheila's Wish

"Well done," I said to Misa, disrupting Lynel and revealing myself.

"Ah... Sorry. I started asking things out of my own curiosity... Aha ha..."

Hmm. She didn't seem to be saying that merely to humble herself. But it was fine—she wasn't the only one curious about Lay's background.

"Nevertheless, you've succeeded."

I brought the tip of my finger to Sheila's forehead, ready to cast Rivide.

My chosen origin was the past Sheila, back when she had picked up Lay. The conversation just now had been somewhat vague, but I had no trouble locating her. After all, I was only rewinding the time of her body to a specific moment. Most diseases could be fixed this way, even without knowing their cause or treatment.

The magic circle surrounded her body, and time began to rewind. However, nothing changed.

"Did it fail?" Misa asked softly.

"No."

The reversal of time had been successful. Lay's mother's body had indeed returned its state from before her sickness—but her magic was just as weak as before.

So what was the cause?

An external factor, separate from her body and source—something that wasn't even here—was controlling whether she lived or died. Was such a thing really possible? If it were demons we were talking about, I would say no—but Sheila was half spirit. Perhaps that was the cause of her weak constitution... If not, then was it a result of the spiritosis?

But Misa was also a half spirit, and she was full of life. Spirits really were strange creatures.

“Looks like I have no choice but to find out how this hospital is stabilizing her condition,” I said, making my way to the door.

The unknown demon in charge of this facility had to know the secret. It would be rather beneficial if there was a clue lying around.

Just then, Misa called out to me. “Lord Anos...!”

“What’s wrong?” I turned back to find her looking at the bed.

Sheila’s eyes, which until now had been closed, were now open slightly. I walked up to the bed, and she looked my way, blinking her eyes fully open.

“Are you...Anos?”

“How do you know me?”

Sheila had been unconscious for a whole year. I should be a stranger to her.

“My mind has been conscious all this time. Lay tells me about you during his visits. He told me he’d made a friend.”

I see. That wasn’t so far-fetched.

“Then you know that Lay has a sword pact embedded in his body, correct?”

“Yes.”

“If I heal you, Lay will be freed of his restraints. I can take care of the sword pact. But first, I need to ask if there’s anything you can tell me about spiritosis.”

With great effort, Sheila opened her mouth. “I overheard someone talking about it here—a doctor, I think. It’s called spiritosis, but it isn’t an actual disease. They say that spirits are born from the heart—”

“I’m aware. Spirits are the realization of rumors, folklore, and legends—the embodiment of hopes, fears, and desires.”

She nodded weakly, exhaling in pain. “Spirits are born from the hearts of many, from their intense longing. That’s why they’re born as adults. But half demon, half spirits are different. We’re part demon, so we’re born as babies. Because of this, our spirit existences are infants as well. That’s what I overhead.”

Hmm. I was starting to understand.

“In other words, newly sprouted rumors, weak desires, and vague aspirations are what form the spirit halves of you.”

“That’s right. As half spirits grow, those hopes and rumors need to grow with us.”

As time passed, the tales and feelings that had born a half spirit had to mature. Only then could they live comfortably like Misa.

“Rumors are easily extinguished, and people give up on their hopes every day. When those hopes die, the spirit halves of us die with them. That’s why many half spirits are so frail.”

No wonder Rivide was ineffective—the source of a spirit’s power resided within the hearts of others. Even if I rewound time for Sheila, the tale or feeling she had been born from was still weakening, so she wouldn’t recover.

“What exactly formed your spirit half?”

“I don’t know... Unlike spirits, half spirits have no way of knowing. That’s why it’s normal for us to live such short lives.”

The end of a hope or rumor spelled death for a half spirit. If I could spread that rumor throughout the world, her spiritosis would be cured. But without knowing what to spread, there was nothing I could do.

Since the Lognorth Magic Hospital had been able to keep Sheila stabilized all this time, they were probably privy to that information. They must be controlling the circulation of the lore just enough to keep her from disappearing.

“What else did that doctor say about your condition?”

“They said that they weren’t told the origin of my spirit half...”

So only a select few had access to the information, huh? No—it was more likely that the unknown demon was the only one who knew. If that was the case, there was nothing to be discovered by searching this hospital. It seemed this opponent was smart enough to anticipate a possible attack.

“Why are you able to speak now?”

“I don’t know... I regained a little of my strength today. But I don’t think it’ll

last long...”

The lore that had birthed Sheila must have spread or increased just a little today, presumably through the hospital’s treatment. It was strange that they had healed her to the point of speaking, though—had they made a mistake somehow? Or had something unexpected happened?

“Before it fades again, there’s something I want you to know.”

“Me? Not Lay?”

“Yes, you.” Sheila looked straight at me. “Lay has loved the sword ever since he grew big enough to hold one. Whenever he had a spare moment, he was outside practicing. I wanted him to enjoy himself, so I enrolled him in the largest training school in town, but he quit in only three days.”

“Why did he quit?” Misa asked, chiming in from behind me.

“There was probably no one there strong enough to face him,” I surmised.

“That’s right,” Sheila confirmed. “He said it’d be awkward if he won against the teachers.”

That sure sounded like something Lay would say.

“After that, he took part in lots of sword tournaments, but he hardly ever lost. The opponents he did lose to, he would surpass by the very next match, and he never lost to the same opponent twice. Before long, he became known as the Demon Swordmaster, an invitation to the Demon King Academy arrived, and people began saying he was one of the Cohort of Chaos.”

Sheila paused, taking a breath before continuing. “I think these are all wonderful things that he can be proud of. But when I praised him, he would smile like he was bored. One time, he even asked me if he would have had more friends if he were less skilled. He’s clumsy around others and only interested in swordplay, so everyone in his social circle was learning the sword as well. But no one could keep up with his talent, so they all regarded him with envy.”

Hmm. Well, that happens all the time.

“If Lay wanted status or fame, I would have supported him. But all he wanted

was something much smaller: to find out what he could do to make the most of his sword. That was all he sought. I'm sure that, without that talent of his, he would have had lots of fun training together with friends."

Few people refined their sword skills out of pure interest. Most picked up the sword to chase fame, status, or power. After all, it was an undeniably deadly weapon. Swinging a sword for the sake of the sword was a mindset most people wouldn't understand.

"After I collapsed, Lay became ever more lonely. He would visit me and tell me what he did each day, but he always seemed bored. But one day, only recently, his tone changed."

Sheila smiled happily. "He told me he'd met someone amazing. That no matter how many times he swung his sword, his opponent wouldn't budge an inch. That he lost in an utter defeat. Isn't that funny? He was so excited about losing. It was the first time I'd seen him so delighted."

With his level of talent, I couldn't blame him. It had been only two months since my rebirth, and I was already frustrated by this era.

"He was talking about you, Anos. Since that day, it's been Anos this, Anos that. I thought to myself that he'd finally made a true friend. I'm so glad you were at Delsgade."

Sheila broke off, the smile vanishing from her face. When she continued speaking, her expression was serious. "He wanted to face you with all he's got in the Demon Sword Tournament. I don't know what the Royalists said to him, but I know he's being forced to do something against his will."

I nodded in agreement.

"Free him, Anos. I beg of you. Let him fight you with his utmost strength."

"You understand, don't you? If I remove the sword pact, you'll die."

"Half spirits cannot live for very long to begin with. I did whatever I could to keep going, hoping I could see the day he grew up. But he'll be okay now. He's got a friend like you, who worries about him despite the danger involved." She smiled softly. "I won't let my life stand in the way of my child's."

Moms sure were strong. My own mother sprang to mind.

§ 25. Shadowing

“You say you’re ready for the worst, yes?”

Sheila nodded at my question.

“Then there’s one spell I wish to try.” I began to draw the magic circle for it.

“A spell you wish to try...?”

“The power of a spirit originates from a current rumor or feeling. In other words, that rumor or feeling shapes their source. That is why supplying you with magic directly won’t alter your condition.”

I tried sending Sheila some magic, but she showed no signs of recovery. That was to be expected though, since rewinding time had also been ineffective. With her source in this state, even reincarnation would be ineffective.

“Another spirit may be able to lend you their power.”

“You mean I can share my magic with Lay’s mom?” Misa asked.

“Yes. But it won’t work with regular magic. Even if a half spirit tried to send magic as one normally would, the result wouldn’t differ from my own.”

“Then what can I do...?”

“Your source is shaped by a rumor or legend. That means that rumor or legend has taken on a kind of power within you that gets converted into your source. If I link your source to Sheila’s, you may be able to send your power to her before it undergoes that conversion, helping her recover to some extent.”

They were both half spirits, so it wasn’t entirely implausible.

“Do spells for half spirits even exist, though?”

Demons didn’t possess a foreign power that transmuted into their source, so such a spell would never be required. The process I had just described must have sounded questionable to Misa.

“It didn’t. Until just now, that is.”

Misa looked at me confusedly.

“I just made one.”

Her jaw dropped. “Y-You made a spell?! Just now?!”

“Yes,” I said.

Misa couldn’t believe her ears. “It normally takes years—sometimes decades—to develop a new spell... You never fail to surprise me, Lord Anos.”

“Crafting a spell is easy. The problem is that it’s untested. Sending Sheila the power of a different tale could potentially have an adverse effect.”

At worst, she would die. But if she was already prepared for that, that would be a risk worth taking.

“It could also be dangerous for you, Misa. If my suspicions are correct, spirits drain both their source and their magic to cast spirit magic.”

After witnessing Misa use Fuska on several occasions, I was fairly certain that was the case —even more so considering most half spirits were said to struggle to get to their feet after using spirit magic.

“The depleted source of a spirit recovers through the strength of their rumor or legend. In other words, Misa, you will be casting spirit magic to purposefully deplete your source, triggering its recovery. It is that recovery power that will then be sent to Sheila.”

Naturally, that meant Misa’s source wouldn’t be able to recover during that time. In the worst-case scenario, she, too, could fall ill with spiritosis and die.

“I can’t allow you to risk that...” Sheila protested.

But Misa looked determined. “I’ll do it.”

“But...”

“Please allow me to do this. Lay isn’t the type who should be dragged into a war between Royalists and Unitarians. Besides, it’d be nice to give those scheming Royalists a scare,” Misa said, grinning. “Don’t worry. Lord Anos won’t let anything bad happen. It’ll definitely be okay.”

“Today might mark my first failure. Don’t let your guard down.”

I sent magic into the circle in preparation.

“For now, I’ll name this spell Lyria. Are you ready?”

“Yes. Go ahead.”

I drew two more magic circles—one over Misa, one over Sheila—and cast Lyria. Their sources became magically linked.

“Use your spirit magic.”

“Okay.”

Misa cast Fuska wastefully. The rain was probably pouring outside. With every passing moment, her source would be further reduced.

When I inspected her with my Eyes, I could indeed spy a power working to restore it, a power that was flowing along the magic link from Misa to Sheila.

Sheila groaned in pain. “Ugh... Ah...”

“Hmm. It seems there’s a difference in the wavelengths of your sources.”

The insertion of power of a different wavelength was worsening Sheila’s condition.

“Wh-What should I do...?” Misa asked fearfully.

“Stay calm and focus. Otherwise there’ll be no saving anyone.”

With one eye on Sheila’s condition, I began making adjustments to the spell formula of Lyria, adjusting the wavelength of magic emanating from Misa’s source. I knew nothing about spirits, so I could only try all the possible options.

Straining my Eyes, I stared into the abyss to watch for the slightest change.

One minute elapsed. Sheila’s body was now even fainter than when we’d begun. She was no longer able to speak.

Three more minutes passed. Sheila was on the verge of vanishing.

“Dear gods...” Misa mumbled, clasping her hands tightly together.

“If you’re going to pray, pray to me. The gods have never granted us any miracles.”

Just then, the acceleration of Sheila’s deterioration paused.

“Hmm. Around here, is it? I think I’ve found it.”

With a target wavelength secured, I began to fine-tune Lyria.

“Oh...!” Misa gasped.

It was slight, but Sheila’s body was regaining its opacity.

“Incredible...” Misa murmured in disbelief. “You didn’t even know how to treat her when we arrived...”

“Stay alert. If you lose focus, it’ll all be over.”

I continued to carefully recompose the formula of Lyria. Slowly but surely, Sheila’s body began to recover in tiny increments.

Misa’s expression grew more distressed. The repeated casting of her spirit magic was wearing away at her source.

“You all right?” I asked.

“Yes.” Misa smiled. “Don’t worry about me... I can keep going...”

It was clear she was pushing herself, but Sheila’s life would be at stake if we stopped now.

“Hold on for a few more minutes. I’ll stabilize her condition.”

It was a bit of a tightrope walk, but having come this far, the rest was just a matter of time. The faintest slipup could result in the worst, but I wasn’t one to make such a mistake.

At that moment, I noticed something. My attention was diverted elsewhere.

“Wh-What’s wrong?” Misa asked.

“Mom’s being followed.”

“Huh...?”

My mother was currently on the road home from Delsgade. There were still a few people around, but she was walking in the opposite direction.

“It would be fine if following her was their only intention, but that doesn’t seem to be the case.”

The demon’s magic was oddly stirred up. In all probability, they intended to

harm her.

What were they after? The sword? Or mom herself? Their hostility was a little too blatant for one merely planning on taking her hostage.

“Let’s go save her,” Misa suggested.

“Naturally, but wait another minute or two. If I look away now, there’ll be no saving Sheila.”

The fan union girls were accompanying mom, but the demon tailing them was far stronger. Though there was strength in numbers, the girls still wouldn’t stand a chance in a fight.

That magic, though... Although stimulated into disarray, it was somehow familiar. As I recalled, this power belonged to— “Emilia.”

“Huh?”

Goodness. What was she up to now?

Using my Magic Eyes of Farsight, I kept a close eye on my mother.

§ 26. Melody from the Flames

The road home.

On the way back from Delsgade, mom was busy chattering with the girls from the fan union. The sky had already darkened, and the neighborhood was deserted.

“Mrs. Voldigoad.”

At the sound of her name, mom turned around. Emilia was standing before her.

“Good evening, Ms. Emilia,” mom said in greeting. “It’s amazing that the finalists are both students from your class.”

“Yes, I’m very proud of them.” Emilia smiled. There was something dark in her expression.

“Is this your way home, by any chance?” mom asked politely.

“No. The rules state that the finalists must hand in their swords before the last day of the tournament. That’s why I came after you in such a hurry.”

The girls in the fan union looked at her warily.

“Was there really a rule like that...?”

“I’m not sure...” they whispered to one another.

Mom showed no sign of alarm. “Is that so? I’m so sorry; I didn’t know! Should I go and give it to a tournament official?”

“That would be preferable. It’s in order to prevent contestants from changing swords. That being said, it’s mostly a formality.”

Ah, so Emilia’s target was my sword. Was she planning on tampering with it, or did she just plan to destroy it?

“I understand. In that case, I don’t want to burden you, so I’ll go and hand it in myself.”

“There’s no need to worry about me. I’m heading back to the academy anyway.”

“I actually forgot something myself! Let’s go together,” mom suggested with a cheery smile.

A look of panic crossed Emilia’s face.

“It’s a little odd, though. I’m sure I read all the rules and regulations carefully, but there was no mention of handing in the sword before the finals. It even said contestants are responsible for managing their own swords.”

The smile on mom’s face never faltered. She didn’t seem at all suspicious of Emilia, but neither was she accepting her words at face value.

If mom had truly done her own research on demon lords, she would have come across information about the Royalists and Unitarians. She would also know that Emilia was a Royalist.

“Let’s get going. I want to check for sure that I got the rules right.”

Emilia was utterly shocked. At a glance, mom was an easy mark to fool, but human society was riddled with far more scams and swindling than demons were accustomed to. A single product manual contained enough terms and conditions to give even the most cynical of demons a headache.

Humans were particularly anal when it came to rules, which was a quality that had remained unchanged in my two thousand years of absence. If anything, their pettiness had intensified. Even when assured with utmost trust, a human would double-check just to be sure. In that regard, Emilia had underestimated the sense of human society. The wall I’d built had prevented any contact between the two races, so I supposed that made sense.

“I can’t allow that...” Emilia said, grabbing at the sheath of the adamantine sword.

“Ms. Emilia?”

“Izabella. Hand over the sword if you don’t want to get hurt.”

Mom yanked the hilt with all her might, drawing the sword from its sheath.

“If you don’t listen, you’ll die holding that sword. Do you understand?”

A magic circle for Gusgam appeared in Emilia's palm, but mom didn't give in to the threat.

"I shall burn that repulsive body of yours for giving birth to that royalty-defying mongrel."

Deep-red flames swelled from the magic circle, forming a blazing fireball that hurtled towards mom.

"Ma'am, run away!"

The eight fan union girls cast anti-magic all at once. For a brief moment, the resulting magic wall blocked Gusgam—until the flames soared violently over it.

"AWAAAAAAAAAAH!"

Swallowed by the fierce flames, the fan union girls crumbled to the floor. The anti-magic had saved their lives, but they had suffered severe burns.

"Girls!" mom shrieked. "Why... Why would you do that to your precious students, Ms. Emilia?"

"Those filthy mixed-bloods are no students of mine. They're only beggars scavenging the scraps of my lessons," Emilia scoffed. She shot mom a sinister smirk. "Now, hand over the sword."

"Why do you want it?"

"Why? Don't play innocent with me," Emilia said, her tone filled with dogged conviction. "My brother, Kurt Ludwell, is the greatest swordsman of Royalist society. His power and spirit are nobler than all others'. Anos Voldigoad is despicable scum for using such underhanded methods to defeat him. There's no way I could stand idly by and watch as he so brazenly takes to the stage for the finals."

"Anos won that fight fair and square! Your brother wouldn't want you to do this!"

Emilia glared at my mother with all her anger. "It is royalty that decides what is fair and just. There is no nobility in Anos Voldigoad's power. No matter how strong he may be, his power is vulgar and cowardly. It is unforgivable for that cowardice to win over royalty."

“Don’t you think it’s wrong to break his sword to disqualify him from the finals? If royalty is so noble, you should do the right thing!”

“You seem to be mistaken, Izabella. Royalty does not need to do the right thing. What royalty does *is* the right thing. The insolence of telling a royal right from wrong is the same as criticizing royalty!”

Gusgam reappeared in Emilia’s hand.

Anti-magic was deployed before mom.

“Ma’am... Please run away...”

The eight fan union girls were heaving their burnt bodies upright.

“No! Not without you!”

“If we lessen our anti-magic, we’ll be burned alive by Gusgam. Please run as far as you can. Lord Anos is sure to save us!”

“But...if you girls get caught by that fire, you’ll die! You’re already burned so terribly...”

Emilia put even more magic into her spell. Gusgam swelled to double its earlier size and continued to grow. Their difference in power was too great—there was no way the fan union’s anti-magic could defend against it.

But the girls laughed anyway.

“It’ll be okay! There’s eight of us and one of her.”

“Hmm. It seems I went too easy on her.”

“Hey! Don’t go imitating Lord Anos!”

“By imitating him, I can borrow one billionth of Lord Anos’s power. It’s fan magic!”

“What kind of magic is that?!”

“This fight would be a piece of cake if we could borrow even one billionth!”

Despite the overwhelming danger of the situation, the girls were joking around to dispel mom’s concerns.

“Please hurry, ma’am. We can’t unleash the full magnitude of our strength

with you here!”

Mom nodded. “I’ll call for help. Wait for me!”

Sword in hand, she started running.

“As usual, I can’t begin to comprehend what you people are thinking,” Emilia muttered with disdain. “Are you incapable of realizing your own uselessness? You can’t even buy her any time. You have no nobility, no power, no intelligence. The word ‘fool’ was invented to describe people like you.”

Emilia cast another Gusgam with her other hand.

“We’re not useless...”

“And we’re not fools...” the girls muttered as if to themselves.

“We’re going to protect those important to Lord Anos...”

“We’ll protect the people he loves!”

“Let’s go, everyone!”

The fan union combined their strength, deploying a barrier with all their might. But the Gusgam released from Emilia’s right hand burned its way through it with ease.

Once the flames dispersed, the eight girls rose from the smoke, all holding spears formed by Iris. Having evaded damage from the latest fireball, they charged at Emilia together. But Emilia’s left hand fired Gusgam in every direction.

Swept up by the flames, the girls were sent flying.

“Eeeeeeeeeek!”

“As I told you, you can’t even buy any time.”

Mom was still within Emilia’s sights. Gusgam sparked in the teacher’s palm. If she shot it now, mom wouldn’t make it out of the way in time.

Just then, a faint melody filled the air.

“I’m on top, and you’re below...”

It was singing—and it was coming from the fan union girls on the ground.

“Instant...slaughter, overthrow... Whew... Ahah...”

Some of the girls staggered to their feet, but they barely had the strength left to fight. All Emilia had to do was ignore them, and it would all be over.

“I’m on top, and you’re below...”

Emilia’s face contorted with anger. “Stop that,” she commanded in a low tone.

Another one of the girls got up.

“Easy victory...easy foe... Ooh... Ahah...”

“Are you deaf? I’m telling you to stop!” Emilia yelled, unable to tolerate the sound. She used Gusgam to scorch one of the girls, but the student continued singing in order to draw Emilia’s attention.

“O praise be...to Lord Anos’s sword...”

She was trying to buy as much time as she could.

“His prey sprawls across the arena bed...”

The seven remaining students charged at Emilia bare-handed.

“Lord Anos’s sword fills them...toe to head...”

“I said stop! Stop it already!”

The girls burned, but the song continued.

“Even the brawniest man...takes just one shot...”

Another girl fell. They knew they’d be burned for singing, yet they raised their voices anyway.

“To be filled up...filled up...filled up...a lot...”

The gasped melody echoed weakly.

“I’m on top...and you’re below...”

“I’m the one that’s on top! You lot are below royalty! Cease that insolent singing at once! This is blasphemy!”

Emilia cast a barrage of magic, burning the girls in her fury.

“Spurt to death...spurt to go...whew... Ahah...”

One, then another girl dropped to the ground.

“I’m on top...and you’re below...”

Only two remained.

“Oh, oh, oh, the relief... Ooh... Ahah...”

Then the last student burned in the flames of Gusgam.

“Go on, go on, gasp for it... Praise be to his splendiferous...”

But the singing continued from within the flames.

“What a waste of my time...” Emilia snapped, clicking her tongue. “Why can’t you see that your actions are futile? This is why you’re mongrels.”

She cast Fless and took to the air. In no time at all, she had caught back up to mom.

“Die!”

The burning orb of Gusgam reached mom in an instant. There, it burst into a blazing pillar of fire.

“Mwa ha ha ha!” Emilia cackled as she descended to the ground. “Ah, that feels so much better. Perhaps I should send her corpse to that misfit?”

She walked forward with a skip in her step.

“You seem to be in a good mood, Emilia. Did something pleasant happen?”

Emilia froze mid-step as she caught sight of my back.

“Anos...?” mom wheezed.

I’d used Gatom to teleport from the hospital just in time to become mom’s shield.

“Are you hurt, mom?”

“I...I’m fine,” she replied, quickly hiding her hands behind her back. They were burned. I’d teleported at the very last moment so had been unable to protect her completely.

I cast Ent to heal her, then turned to the teacher.

“You know, Emilia...” I took one step forward. There was still quite a distance between us, yet Emilia flinched back. “I consider myself a tolerant person. Even before my reincarnation, I was never one to anger. As long as the fools buzzing around me corrected themselves, I found it in my heart to forgive them. I never thought myself small-minded enough to lose myself in a blind rage.”

I glared straight at Emilia. How did my face look right now? I couldn’t even picture it.

“But it seems I was mistaken,” I said, taking another step forward. The echo of my voice was colder than I’d anticipated. “I shall not forgive you, Emilia.”

§ 27. The Demon King's Curse

Overcome with fear at my radiating bloodlust, Emilia backed away, trembling.

“What’s wrong? Is this lowly blood frightening you?”

“C-Cease your arrogance at once! You cannot scare me!”

Contrary to her words, Emilia continued backing away, searching desperately for an opportunity to flee.

“Stop moving,” I said.

She cast Fless to take to the sky.

“I said *don’t move*.”

Emilia’s body froze instantly to the spot. She wasn’t even able to manipulate her magic anymore. Anger had shaken my words, filling them with powerful magic that had compelled her to obey me. Her anti-magic had stood no chance—both her body and magic were now restrained.

Despite this, Emilia continued her attempts to flee, her body as limp as a rag doll. All she could do was roll on the ground pathetically.

I walked slowly up to her and stopped beside her. Her expression was a picture of humiliation and fear.

“Hmm.” I grabbed her by the scruff of her neck and lifted her up.

“R-Release me! What do you think you’re doing?!”

Ignoring her question, I dragged her with me to where the fan union girls were lying. Then, I tossed her aside.

“Urk...”

Unable to move, she had no choice but to tumble miserably to the ground.

“I’ll play with you soon. You can cower there until I’m ready.”

With that, I approached the union girls and drew a magic circle around them.

They were still breathing, but barely. I cast Ent, and their bodies healed instantly. Then I used Iris to replace their burnt clothes.

“Lord Anos...”

The girls blinked slowly as they turned to look at me. Although their wounds were healed, their minds were heavily dazed.

“We tried to protect your mother, but...”

They hung their heads in shame, believing they had failed me.

“Tell me your names.”

“What...?”

“Your names. What are they?”

“I’m Ellen. Ellen Mihace...”

I turned to the girl beside her. “And you?”

“My name is Jessica Arnett...”

“You?”

“Maia Zemt...”

One after another, I continued to ask each of the girls their names.

Nono Inota.

Xia Minsheng.

Himca Haula.

Catha Crunoah.

Shelia Nijem.

“Ellen, Jessica, Maia, Nono, Xia, Himca, Catha, Shelia,” I said, addressing each of them in turn, “I will remember your names for the rest of my life. Thank you.”

I’d been expecting a noisy reaction, but the girls merely stood there in silence, tears streaming down their cheeks.

“You can leave the rest to me.”

I turned my attention back to Emilia. “Now, as for you...”

I grabbed her by the neck.

“Wh-What are you going to do to me...?!”

“Nothing. That is, not here—mom will worry. Let’s find somewhere else.”

I cast Gatom. My vision turned white for a moment, then cleared to reveal the arena stage. I threw Emilia on the ground before me.

“You may move.”

I crafted a demon sword with Iris and tossed it towards Emilia. It pierced the ground beside her head.

“Use it. I’ll beat that rotten nature of yours straight.”

Emilia stood up, staring at me. “Don’t patronize me, you filthy misfit...”

“Oh? It seems you’ve still got some fight left in you. Come.”

Emilia drew the demon sword and rushed at me. The moment she did, an electric current passed through her from the sword, eating its way through her body.

“Ah— Gyaaaaaaaaah!”

She immediately released it and dropped to the ground.

“Ha ha! What’s the matter, Emilia? Struggling with that sword? Some royalty you are.”

She glared up at me from her hands and knees. “Don’t get so full of yourself, you arrogant misfi— *Gah!*”

I stepped on her head, pressing it to the ground.

“Watch your tone, Emilia. I’m not so tolerant today.”

I held out my hand, and the demon sword rose up, drifting into my palm.

“Have you considered begging for your life?”

“That’s absurd...”

“Acknowledge me as the Demon King of Tyranny, and beg for your life. If you

do, I may change my mind.”

Emilia’s eyes flashed with anger. “How ridiculous. You can blather all you want, but you’ll never be the Demon King of Tyranny. You’re a vulgar, lowborn, worthless misfit that will never even become a demon lord—”

I thrust the demon sword into Emilia’s back, pinning her to the ground.

“Ack... Agh...”

“Impressive attitude. Let me repeat myself. *Beg.*”

“A-As if I’d ever— Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Another electric current coursed through the sword, causing her immense pain.

She glared at me, panting heavily. “Hah... Hah... No matter what you do...your blood will never be noble... That will never change...”

“Hmm. I see. Incidentally, the sword you have there is a bane blade. It’s a magic item with a rather unique effect: a body pierced by its blade will become the host of a hundred poisonous insects, which will fight and eat each other until only one remains. The insects feed on the intense pain of their host and eventually devour their organs.”

“Wha... Ah... Aah...”

“Can you hear it? The sound of the insects crawling within your body...”

“Agh... Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaagh! Nooooooooooo!” she howled.

I placed more weight on Emilia’s head.

“Here’s another interesting detail: after the insects are done eating each other, the power of the final insect will become that of its host.”

“What... What do you mean...?”

“Can’t understand? I’m saying you’ll become the insect. It’s a powerful curse—you may never return to your original form.”

“H-How cowardly can you be? Do you think you can trample on the sublimity of royalty by doing this?!”

I looked down on Emilia as she wailed. “The pain has disappeared, hasn’t it?”

“Huh?”

“It’s evidence your body is approaching the end of its transformation.”

She immediately paled. “No... Stop...”

“What’s wrong? Continue with what you were saying before. What was that about the sublimity of royalty?”

With a humiliated expression, Emilia squeezed out her voice. “I beg of you... Please...stop...”

“Hmm. Looks like there’s only a minute left. Well? How does it feel being reborn as an insect?”

“Please! Please stop this! Save me, I beg of you!”

“It might not be as bad as you expect. You’ll gain more power than you’ve ever possessed before. Why don’t you try to take revenge on me with it?”

Emilia trembled like a leaf. “How... How heartless can you be?!”

“Ha ha ha ha! Heartless? Me?” I stomped on Emilia’s face. “Don’t make me laugh. What were *you* trying to do to my mother?”

Emilia hushed at my cold tone.

“Time’s up.”

I fell silent, waiting for the seconds to tick by. With each passing moment, the fear in Emilia’s face grew increasingly evident.

“I...I understand...”

“Oh? What is it you understand?”

She clenched her teeth and forced the words past her lips. “D-Demon King of Tyranny, Anos Voldigoad... Please grant me your mercy...”

“I refuse.”

Emilia looked like a child on the verge of tears.

“Y-You said you’d save me if I begged for my life... You liar...”

“I said I may change my mind. Unfortunately for you, I did not.”

She was at a loss for words. Tears welled up at the corners of her eyes.

“Five seconds left.”

No longer able to speak, Emilia silently awaited her fate.

“Three...two...one.”

She squeezed her eyes shut.

“Zero.”

Nothing happened. Another ten, then twenty seconds passed, but Emilia’s body remained unchanged.

She opened her eyes. “What...?”

“Bwa ha ha ha! Still haven’t caught on? The bane blade thing was a lie. But you put on a marvelous show for me. ‘Please grant me your mercy,’ was it? So you do have a sweet side after all.”

Emilia flushed red with humiliation.

“I’ll spare you your life.”

“Unforgivable...!” Emilia grabbed my foot, glaring up at me with utter hatred. “I’ll never forgive you! No matter how strong you may be, your power will never have an ounce of nobility! You will always have the lowly blood of a mongrel! I’ll make you regret this defiance one day...for sure! Even if I can’t, my children, my children’s children—every generation of my family onwards—will resent you to the end of eternity!”

“Emilia.” I glared into her eyes. She returned the look with several times the amount of hatred. “I’m the one who will never forgive you. You don’t seem to have realized it yet, but sparing your life means you’ll be suffering a fate far worse than death.”

I kicked Emilia over onto her back, then thrust my right arm into her chest, grabbing her heart.

“Gah... Ack...!”

“Receive this curse for the rest of eternity.”

After flailing for a few seconds, Emilia took her last breath and lay still.

“Face the price of your arrogance.”

I drew a magic circle on the ground. There, a brown-haired, brown-eyed girl was born. The spell was Azheb.

The girl’s eyes widened when she saw her own dead body, its heart pierced through beside her. She flinched back. “That’s me...dead... So who am I...?”

I decided to relay the truth to the confused girl. “How does it feel to be reborn, Emilia?”

“What is this...? This body... This power...”

She was clearly taken aback by the weakness of the power running through her veins.

“Are... Are you trying to disgrace me by giving me this lowly magic—this vulgar power?!”

Laughter bubbled from the pit of my stomach. “Ha ha ha ha! Vulgar power, you say? I see. Well, if you say so. By the way, Emilia,” I said, looking down on her, “how long are you going to continue acting like royalty?”

“What...?”

“I used Syrica to reincarnate you—into a demon with human blood, that is. Go on; use those Eyes of yours to take a peek into the abyss.”

“No... No way...”

Emilia fell to her knees. Her entire frame chattered as she muttered to herself deliriously. She checked her body many times over, but it was clear there was human blood flowing through her. She was no longer a pureblood.

Insanity filled her face as she staggered to her feet, grabbing the demon sword beside her. “No... You lie. This isn’t me...” she muttered, bringing the blade to her throat. She clenched it with all her strength.

“You can die if you want, Emilia, but the curse was placed on your source. No matter how many times you die, you’ll reincarnate into a hybrid forever.”

Blood dripped from Emilia’s neck as she released the sword and let it clatter

to the ground.

“How...do I remove this curse...?”

“There’s no escaping my curses.”

Filled with despair, she crumpled to the ground, shaking her head furiously. She repeated the same word over and over again as if she had lost her mind.

“No... No...!”

“Evaluate your life in Dilhade from a different perspective. You may find that *you* were the one with prejudiced opinions.”

“This can’t be... No...”

All set to leave the arena, I cast Gatom.

“NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!”

As my vision turned white, Emilia’s crazed scream echoed through the night.

§ 28. Mother's Words

I returned to my original location and picked up the sheath that had fallen to the ground.

"Anos!" mom cried, immediately running over to hug me. "Are you okay? You're not hurt anywhere?"

Hmm. I'm pretty sure that was my line.

"I'm fine. What about you, mom?"

"You healed me up perfectly, so I'm fit as a fiddle. What about Ms. Emilia?"

"Mildly scarred. I'm sure she won't be returning to the academy after her misconduct."

Emilia had attempted to destroy my sword to prevent me from participating in the finals. Her actions probably weren't aligned with Avos Dilhevia's plan, or else I wouldn't have been asked to enter the tournament in the first place. This was all her own doing.

Avos Dilhevia, the one falsely claiming the title of Demon King of Tyranny, had implanted the unfounded belief of royal supremacy into the minds of demonkind. But he wasn't able to control everything. The Royalists staunchly believed his lies—enough so to act against his intentions. There was no doubt that more demons like Emilia would appear someday.

"I see... Well, I'm glad you're safe at least," mom said with a look of heartfelt relief. "Oh, that's right. Here; this is for you."

She held out my sword.

"Thanks."

"Tee hee. See, I promised I'd look after it no matter what."

I accepted the sword and sheathed it.

"Going home?" I then asked, holding out my hand.

“Yup!” mom chirped, placing her hand on top of mine.

I looked back at the fan union watching us. “See you later,” I called.

“R-Right! Have a good night, Lord Anos.”

“I will. You all sleep well,” I said before casting Gatom and teleporting us home.

Once back, I turned to mom. “I’m heading out for a bit, mom.”

“What? But we just got home... What about dinner?”

“I was in the middle of a hospital visit. I’ll eat once I get back.”

“All right. Who is it you’re visiting, dear?”

“Lay’s mother.”

Mom looked at me worriedly. “Is she sick?”

“The worst has passed.”

“I see. Okay then, you’d better get going.”

Mom waved me off as I cast Gatom once more, returning to the Lognorth Magic Hospital. Misa was where I’d left her, standing beside Lay’s sleeping mother. With the spell formula for Lyria perfected, Sheila’s condition had stabilized—that was why I had been able to go and save mom from Emilia—but it was still too early to relax.

When Misa noticed my arrival, she opened her mouth to speak.

I held up a hand to stop her. “Someone’s coming,” I whispered, casting Lynel to turn invisible and Najila to hide any traces of magic.

The door opened with a clack. Lay walked in holding a shopping bag and a cup.

“I thought you might be hungry, so I brought you some bread,” he said, but he froze before handing her the bag. “What’s this...?”

“The spell’s called Lyria. I’m half spirit as well, so I wondered if I’d be able to share my power with your mother. It isn’t the most efficient method, though...”

Only a thirtieth of the power Misa put out could be transferred to Sheila.

Converting a power of different origin into a new source was a reckless endeavor to begin with. Even after optimizing the formula, this was the limit of the spell's effect.

"I gave it a go in the hope it'd have an effect on her spiritosis, and it seems like it's working," Misa continued, lying to cover up my involvement.

"Can you save her like that?"

"Don't worry, she'll definitely be saved. Then, once she is...you won't have to listen to the Royalists anymore, right...?"

Whoever was monitoring Lay would be listening in at this very moment. It would certainly be convenient if they tried to pull something that revealed their identity, but perhaps that was too much to hope for.

Although Sheila's condition had stabilized, she was still in a vulnerable state. With such an inefficient method, Misa's source wouldn't be able to sustain Sheila's full recovery. The Royalists had no need to rush anything.

"Either way, I still have a demon sword pact stuck inside me." Lay held out the bag of bread once again, offering it to Misa. "Shouldn't you rest a bit? Your body won't be able to go on like that for much longer."

Lay must have noticed Misa's weakening power.

"I'm fine... The finals are tomorrow..."

"Mom's magic has recovered a bit, but you won't make it through at this rate. You'll collapse before the finals."

"It's fine. I don't care if I collapse."

"That spell is eating away at your source, isn't it?"

Misa nodded in response.

"You could die."

"Maybe so."

Lay placed the bread and cup on the table before turning back to her. "Think this through. You became a Unitarian to improve the lives of hybrids in Dilhade. Do you really want to give up that dream over trivial sentimentality?"

“You think that’s all it is?”

“I do. Even if you risk your life here, you’ll only save one life at most. I believe there’ll come a day when you’ll truly have to put your life on your line—a time when you’ll fight for the lives of many.”

Hearing this, Misa giggled. “That won’t happen.”

“Really?”

“Lay, royal supremacy has prevented me from meeting my own father. I began my Unitarian activities because I didn’t want there to be any more children like me.”

Lay listened with a serious expression. “That’s why you should save your life for the right moment,” he said.

“There’s someone in front of me at *this* moment unable to see his mother because of the Royalists. I didn’t join the Unitarians to turn my back on him for the sake of saving others in the future.”

Sacrificing a single life for the good of many would normally be the right thing to do. In fact, it was exactly what I had done until now—as the Demon King of Tyranny, one had to destroy in order to protect.

“I can’t wait for someday. I want to save people now. I want to save as many suffering people as possible at this very moment. If I can’t do that, then I won’t be able to save anyone when that day comes.”

Lay’s shoulders relaxed as he sighed. “You’re strong,” he told Misa gently.

“I’m an idiot, really... I’m nowhere near as smart as you, Lay.”

“That’s not true. You have courage, unlike me.”

Misa laughed, struggling desperately to suppress her pained expression.

Lay walked slowly up to Misa and stopped beside her. “Thank you.”

“Oh, no, I haven’t done anything—”

With a well-aimed chop, Lay knocked Misa unconscious.

I halted Lyria at the same moment.

“I’m sorry. I should have stopped you sooner. You’ll die if you continue,” he mumbled, sounding vexed at his own cowardice. He held his head in his hands as if unsure what to do and remained in that position for some time.

Eventually, a weak voice broke the silence.

“Lay...”

He raised his head, stunned.

“Lay...”

“Mom...?”

Lay rushed over to Sheila’s side and brought his face close to hers. Her eyes were barely open.

“Mom,” Lay said. It was his first time seeing his mother awake in over a year, so he put on his brightest smile, but his smiling face seemed ready to burst into tears at any moment. “Wait for me, mom. You’ll be better soon.”

“It’s okay...”

“Mom?”

“My mind was awake the whole time, so I know everything. It’s okay, Lay. You should live the life you want, the way you want to... You’re a carefree soul who thinks of nothing but swords. I know you’re too kind to abandon me. But you should know that I’m happy as long as you’re free.”

A single tear rolled down Sheila’s cheek.

“Mom, what are you saying? You have nothing to worry about—I’ll save you.”

“Lay. Don’t lose. I’ll always be on your side. Take care of your friends...”

Having used up the last of her strength, Sheila closed her eyes.

“Mom...?” Lay called, trying to keep his mother awake. “Mom!”

But she gave no reply, as though she had fallen into a deep sleep.

§ 29. Cheering

The next morning.

I returned to the Lognorth Magic Hospital after spending the night at home.

“Ugh...” Misa groaned as she regained consciousness. She sat up and gazed at me sleepily. “Lord Anos... Where’s Lay...?”

“He left for Delsgade.”

“Oh... So it’s morning...” Misa looked over at Sheila. Lay’s mother’s condition had improved significantly since we had first arrived, but she was still in a critical state.

I had hoped to use Lyria overnight to encourage a little more improvement, but Misa and Sheila’s wavelengths were just too incompatible. There was nothing that could be done about the inefficiency that caused, and it wasn’t worth risking Misa’s body to continue the process. If Lay hadn’t stopped her, I would have done so myself.

“Stay here and keep an eye out until the finals are over,” I instructed, using Iris to create a small glass marble on the tip of my finger. “If anything happens, break this. It’ll let you escape the shadow-stitching dagger.”

Using Lent, I conditioned the marble to activate Jia once shattered. Jia was a spell that produced light. If light filled the room, all shadows would be eliminated, and the shadow-stitching dagger would lose its effect.

“I’ll see you again after the finals.”

“Um... Lord Anos!” Misa called, stopping me.

“Yes?”

She looked at me earnestly. “Can you use Lyria one more time?”

“For what purpose?”

“I’ll help Lay’s mother recover before the finals begin. That way all you have

to do is remove the sword pact from Lay.”

“With Lyria’s efficiency, you won’t make it in time.”

It would take at least ten days for Sheila to recover enough for her to walk. Besides, Misa’s life would be at risk if she supplied her with power for so long.

“It’s better than doing nothing.”

“Praying won’t make a miracle happen.”

“That may be true...but we can’t give up just because miracles don’t exist,” Misa said sincerely. “I don’t want to regret anything. I don’t want to look back on this moment and think I could have done more. Even if my efforts won’t amount to anything, I want to do everything I can.”

Hmm. So she wasn’t completely blind to the situation.

“Understood.” I cast Lyria to connect Misa and Sheila’s sources once more. “If a miracle does occur, come to the arena with Sheila. Those watching Lay will notice, but I can handle the rest.”

Misa nodded firmly. “I will.”

“Later.”

I cast Gatom to return to Delsgade.

On the way to the arena waiting room, I thought about the finals. I already knew Sheila wouldn’t make it, despite the hope I’d given Misa. Miracles don’t happen on their own.

Lay had been ordered to entrap me in the finals, but he didn’t specialize in spellcasting. His demon sword was powerful, but its only ability was to cut through magic circles, nothing more. Not only that, but the use of a different demon sword was forbidden. So what was Avos Dilhevia plotting?

Well, it didn’t really matter. All I had to do was cure Sheila’s spiritosis, extract the sword pact from Lay, and beat up whoever was behind this. Simple.

Upon my arrival at the waiting room, I opened the door and went inside. Lay would already be waiting in his room on the other side. I would much prefer to fight him without all these trifling schemes taking place, but alas.

I was gazing absentmindedly at my adamant sword, waiting for the finals to begin, when I heard a knock on the door.

“Who is it?”

A beat later, there was a reply. “It’s me...”

Ah, it was Misha.

“What’s wrong?”

The door clicked open, and Misha peered into the room. “I’ve come to cheer you on.”

“Me?”

Misha nodded.

“I see. So why are you standing out there?”

“Can I come in?”

“Of course.”

The door opened, and Misha came inside.

“Are you nervous?” she asked.

“Nervous? Hmm. I’d like to experience that someday. Unfortunately, I’m unfamiliar with the feeling.”

Misha blinked twice.

“What’s wrong?”

“That sounds like something you’d say,” she answered, smiling.

“Is Sasha not with you today?”

“She’s with your mom.”

“Oh? That’s unusual.”

Misha had been the one learning to cook from mom, but Sasha hadn’t seemed especially close to her.

“We heard she was attacked yesterday.”

“Did mom tell you that?”

Misha nodded again. “Sasha promised to protect her so you can focus on the finals.”

That was considerate of her.

“Did you notice anything different about the arena?” I asked, changing the subject.

Misha tilted her head in confusion.

“Were there any signs of someone sneaking in, I mean?”

“It looked the same as always.”

Hmm. I had left the pre-reincarnated Emilia’s corpse behind in the arena yesterday, but it seemed that someone had already disposed of it. This only confirmed my suspicion that her actions had been against Avos Dilhevia’s wishes. If he made a fuss about the incident, it would affect his plans for the finals. In this case, it was unlikely for him to make a move on mom—but it never hurt to be careful. It was reassuring to know that Sasha was there for her.

“What’s wrong?” Misha asked, staring at my face.

“Ah, it’s nothing important.”

“Maybe I could help.”

I’d just said it wasn’t important, but...

“Yes, I suppose. Then, if I may, I’d like you to cheer me on.”

Misha tilted her head. “Cheer you on?”

“You told me you came to do that. I haven’t experienced it too often before.”

Misha nodded. “Okay.”

She walked up to me and took my hand. Her small palm rested on my own.

“Don’t be afraid.”

“I wasn’t afraid to begin with.”

Misha lowered her head in thought, then looked back up at me. “You can win.”

“Of course I can. I’ve never lost before.”

She looked a little troubled as she thought for another moment. “I’ll be happy if you win.”

“There’s nothing fun about watching the Demon King of Tyranny win, is there?”

Misha shook her head. “You’re my classmate...and my friend.”

“That’s true.”

“Lay too. Two people from my team are fighting in the finals to determine the greatest swordsman in Dilhade,” Misha told me in her usual even tone. “That’s amazing.”

“Is it?”

Just then, a Leaks communication filled through the room.

“Thank you for your patience! The final round of the Dilhade Demon Sword Tournament will now commence. First up is Anos Voldigoad of the Demon King Academy Delsgade!”

It was time.

“I’m heading off now.”

I started towards the passage leading to the arena but paused when I heard Misha’s voice.

“You’ve been reborn.”

I turned to see her staring me in the eyes.

“You’re a student now,” she said, smiling faintly. “Have fun.”

Hmm. Not bad. So this was what it felt like to be cheered on. It was a rather pleasant feeling, actually.

Even though Misha knew I was the Demon King of Tyranny, she saw me for who I was now, not for who I’d been before. She saw the new me, the me after my rebirth.

School life was tedious and boring. My descendants were weak. Magic had regressed. There was nothing for me to learn. There was nothing to gain by doing anything here. However, she might have a point. This was, in all

likelihood, what I had been seeking all these years. This lazy, carefree time.

“Misha.”

She tilted her head questioningly.

I grinned at her. “I’m going to win this tournament.”

“Mm-hmm.”

I turned on my heel and headed down the passageway—to the finals stage, where my friend awaited me.

§ 30. The Finals

The moment I stepped foot onto the stage, cheers filled the arena. Amongst them were the voices of mom and dad.

“Anooos! Do your best, dear!”

“You’d better win after coming this far, my boy! Give it your all!”

The fan union could also be heard.

“Lord Anooos! You look as lovely as ever!”

“Show us your insta-kill!”

“Aw, but if he finishes things instantly, we won’t get long to check him out.”

“Th-Then please torment your opponent long and hard!”

“Oh, but then I’ll wish I were the one being tormented!”

“What’s wrong with you?!”

Granted, they were as lively as ever.

“Next up is a member of the Lognorth Demon Sword Association—the swordsman who has advanced through this competition like a surging tide, Lay Grandsley!”

Lay appeared from the passageway on the other side of the arena.

The crowd cheered louder than ever.

“There he is—the Demon Swordmaster!”

“Put that mixed-blood brat in his place!”

“Yeah! Teach those Unitarian morons a lesson!”

The jeers of the Royalists made this seem like a proxy war between the Royalists and the Unitarians.

“Hmm. What a rowdy audience.”

“No kidding,” Lay said with his usual smile. He seemed to have put his worries behind him, as his expression was honest and refreshed.

“Before the finals commence, the tournament committee has an announcement to make,” an owl declared.

I had been expecting a petty trick to be involved, but it seemed they were bringing it out at the start.

“The final match will be held with special rules. First, each competitor will wear an armband.”

At the owl’s words, two wardens approached us.

“Hold out your left arm.”

I held out my arm as ordered, and a shining armband was snapped around it.

“The destruction of this armband will also count as defeat.”

Hmm. I could feel my magic being sapped away. It must be an Absorption Band—an artifact from the Mythical Age. As long as the armband was worn, it would absorb the power of its wearer for eternity. The average demon would struggle to cast even the simplest of spells while wearing one.

The only way to prevent its effect was to destroy it, but that would result in my defeat. So I had no choice but to let my power be drained, huh?

“You better not try anything funny, Anos Voldigoad,” a voice echoed in my head. It was a Leaks message directed solely at me. I traced the magic and looked up.

It was coming from the owl.

“Your power is being sent to another location.”

I used my Eyes, and sure enough, the ring was transporting my power elsewhere via a magic link.

“If the flow of magic ceases, Sheila Grandsley’s spiritosis will worsen to the point of her demise.”

I see. So they had everything prepared to erase the root of Sheila’s source.

“Similarly, if you defeat Lay Grandsley, his source will be erased.”

Hmm. With a demon sword pact at play, there was no doubt of that.

“Think wisely.”

Having completed its transmission, the owl cut the Leaks connection.

The wardens then finished attaching Lay’s armband and left the stage. From what I could tell, his was a regular armband.

“And now,” the owl continued, “let the finals of the Dilhade Demon Sword Tournament...commence!”

At the signal, Lay drew Initio. The pure-white blade swung down towards me. I drew my adamantine sword and used it to block Initio.

The clang of metal on metal resounded between us.

“I wonder how much nicer it would have been if I could swing my sword freely,” Lay said.

“Hmm. You make it sound as though you no longer can,” I replied with a half smile.

“Can you fight with them sapping your magic?”

“Oh, don’t worry about me. If you think this is enough to weaken me, you’ll be dead before you know it.”

“I figured as much.”

With a flawless sweep, Lay readied his sword. I lowered my own sword, holding it in my usual relaxed grip. We were already within striking range of one another, but neither of us moved.

There were no openings in Lay’s stance. No matter where I struck, he was prepared to repel me. My usual method was to force my way through enemy defenses with brute strength, but that wouldn’t work this time.

If I attacked too carelessly, Initio would slice through the spell formulas for Najila and Adesin, ending the match on the spot. I had no choice but to wait for him to strike first and to target his openings. But even if I won that way, Lay’s source would disappear.

So how should I approach this? It was a rather troublesome situation to be in,

but not an unsalvageable one. I decided that, for now, I would start by watching my opponent's first move.

Lay, however, didn't seem to be moving. We stared at each other for several minutes in pure silence.

Eventually, Lay relaxed with a chuckle.

"I was actually told to buy time in the finals," he muttered.

It was surprising to hear him reveal his orders.

"The longer I draw out this battle, the greater my advantage will be."

Casting Adesin and Najila together consumed a considerable amount of power. It was possible to cast the spells in brief bursts, but Lay's sword was too formidable for that. On top of that, the Absorption Band was still sapping away my power.

If Lay took a defensive approach, it would indeed be difficult for me to break through with only an adamantine sword. If this continued, I would certainly be at a disadvantage.

"But I don't want to."

In the same breath, the tip of Initio blurred. He lunged forward faster than the eye could see, grazing me on the cheek as I dodged to the side.

To distance myself, I swung my sword at Lay's left hand. I expected him to withdraw it and avoid the attack, but he closed the gap between us instead.

Our bodies touched, and my arm stopped. No swinging could be done at such close range.

"Hah...!"

What in the world was this technique? There wasn't even space for a fist to strike me, yet his sword was rushing at my jaw.

I pulled myself back to avoid it. The pure-white blade flashed before my eyes as I lost my balance.

If I caught the blade with my sword, it would be slashed to pieces. In that case...

“Huh...?” Lay blinked in surprise as his sword dug into my left arm. Flesh tore as the blade sunk right down to the bone—but that was where it stopped.

“Too bad for you, my bones are rather hard.”

“Your body’s as ridiculous as you are.”

Lay withdrew Initio from my arm and backed away to regroup. But as he did so, I noticed his left arm was dangling unnaturally. Come to think of it, his swing just now had been a little slower than usual. If he had held his sword with both hands, he would have dug the blade into my bone.

“What did you do to your arm?”

Lay grinned carelessly. “I wanted to have as fair of a match as possible.”

“You cut your own tendon?”

“It’s actually quite painful.” He casually adjusted his one-handed grip on Initio.

“Are you sure?”

Avoiding a drawn-out battle and cutting his own tendon were actions that defied the demons threatening him. He was essentially discarding the pact that ensured his mother would be healed.

“Anos,” Lay said quietly, “when I faced you during that team exam, I thought to myself, ‘This is the person I’ve been waiting for—an opponent this sword can’t best.’ I wanted to face you with all my strength.” He watched me as he spoke, never letting down his guard. “But with my mother and me held hostage, you’re unable to give it your all.”

Lay was being watched. With those words, the demon who had implanted the sword pact within him would know I was aware of the truth.

“I gave it a lot of thought, but in the end, all I have is my sword,” Lay said resolutely. “I’ve defied the pact. The demon sword has sunk into my source.”

I should have expected as much. Anyone else would have had their source destroyed the moment the pact dug in. But it was only a matter of time for Lay too.

“I will die soon. My mother can’t be saved. There’s no reason left for you to

hold back.”

He pointed the tip of Initio at the Absorption Band on my left arm.

“I’m going to defeat you to protect our friendship.”

If he destroyed the Absorption Band, Lay would be the victor. And as the owl had so kindly informed me, Sheila’s origin would be erased, which in turn would kill her. But if the armband wasn’t destroyed, my power would be drained for eternity. Had he decided to take his mother’s life, having realized I wouldn’t do it myself?

All to protect me. At the cost of his own life.

“You won’t ask for my help?” I asked.

“Even though you might die?”

“I shan’t die.”

“That may be true. But that’s not what I mean. No matter how transcendent you are, friends don’t expose friends to such dangers.” Lay chuckled. “This was the best answer for me. I can defeat you, and I can protect you.”

I see. Honestly, if that was his goal, then all I had to do was lose. Sheila’s life would be at risk if the Absorption Band were destroyed, but the owl hadn’t said anything about my adamantite sword being broken. In other words, Avos Dilhevia’s goal was to drain my magic.

He probably didn’t even care about the outcome of the tournament. I could lose on purpose, remove the sword pact from Lay, then face him again after I had crushed Avos Dilhevia’s scheme. That would be the wisest move.

But that wouldn’t do.

With the sword pact sinking into his source, all Lay sought from me was a fight. An honest fight without any regard for fame or position.

He was sacrificing everything for a final showdown.

That might seem foolish in the eyes of others, but it was just how far he was willing to go. If I postponed this until later, I’d lose the right to call myself his friend.

“You’ve stood firm in your convictions, never yielding to the enemy and never choosing to depend on me. That is why you’re my friend.” I took a step forward. “Lay, you don’t have to think about anything. Royalist or Unitarian, none of that matters. Forget about your mother for now. Only you and I stand on this stage.”

Lay beamed as if really, truly happy.

“Now, come. I’ll entertain you to your heart’s content.”

Whatever Avos Dilhevia was planning, I wouldn’t let him interfere.

Mom and dad were rooting for me.

I’d promised Misha I would win.

And Lay was challenging me with his life on the line.

This final had nothing to do with the Demon King of Tyranny. This was the match that we alone desired—the match between Lay and my reborn self.

§ 31. Mid-Showdown

“Here I go, Anos.”

Lay pointed the tip of his sword my way, then started running. His body shot forward like an arrow, his thrust aimed at my throat.

“Too slow.”

I stabbed the adamantine sword forward to meet the tip of Initio. If they had collided, the formula-cutting demon sword would have destroyed Najila and Adesin alongside the adamantine sword.

But Lay avoided a direct collision, adjusting his thrust mid-lunge. His blade was aimed at the Absorption Band. Just before Initio could pierce it, I opened my palm.

Lay came to a screeching halt.

“What’s wrong? You could have skewered my hand just now.”

“I’d lose any chance of victory if you grabbed my blade.”

Hmm. How shrewd. If he had pierced my left arm, I would have grabbed his sword. And while I couldn’t beat Lay when it came to sword ability, there was no way I would lose in a contest of strength. If I had been able to grab his blade just now, I would have been able to seal his sword—but of course, he wouldn’t let me have it that easy.

“It’s my turn next.”

I extended my left hand, reaching out to grab roughly at Initio’s blade. Lay quickly drew the sword back to evade me. At the same time, I swung my adamantine sword down at Lay’s head with all my might.

Lay had no choice but to block my sword with his. But if our swords clashed, mine would certainly be destroyed, which would result in his victory in the tournament—but his defeat in our match. If he wanted to release me from my burdens, he had to win by breaking the armband, so avoiding my sword was in

his best interests.

Now what would he do? If he didn't use his sword to defend himself, he'd suffer a fatal wound.

"Hah...!" Lay intercepted my sword with Initio. But the moment our blades met, I felt a strange sensation in my hand.

The impact was soft, as though the shock had been absorbed by Lay's sword. Instead of resisting the full might of my swing, he had skillfully parried me, redirecting the force of the blow.

"Oh? Fascinating. Show me that again."

"Sure. As many times as you like."

Sword met sword once again, but the sound of the impact was astonishingly quiet. My blade was deflected over and over as Lay saw through each change of angle and every variation of force. At a glance, his movements appeared rather simple, but in practice, they were a miraculous feat. Even in the Mythical Age, there had been few who could achieve such technique.

"What a fearsome man. If you had any intent of breaking my sword, you could have done so several times over by now."

"Not if your sword were a demon sword and you didn't have that band around your arm."

We were both similarly handicapped. I was using an adamantine sword, wearing an Absorption Band, and had to continuously cast Najila to get around the rules. Lay, meanwhile, was unable to use his left arm and had to avoid direct contact with my blade. Neither of us could exert our full strength, but that didn't mean we had to show any consideration for one another.

"I can't believe it..." came voices from the crowd, who were exchanging irrelevant remarks as usual. "That piece of junk can take a hit from Initio!"

"Initio can slice through spell formulae embedded in other swords... Every sword it's faced up till now has snapped, so how come this one's fine?!"

"Is it because there's no magic in the sword, so there's no spell formula to cut in the first place?"

“Impossible! If it were a plain metal sword, it would have snapped at the first blow!”

“Could it be true, then...?”

“That the sword was forged from the heart of a true artisan...?”

“That there’s something other than magic power inside it...?”

The exchange of blows between Lay and me was so fierce, not one of our spectators seemed to have an accurate grasp of the events before them.

“Are you aiming for a test of endurance?” I quipped.

Our swords crossed, and Lay parried once more. He was moving rather defensively, perhaps wary of me reaching for his blade.

“I don’t mean to take advantage of your handicap. Buying time is exactly what the Royalists want.”

“Your concern is unnecessary. It matters not if my magic is siphoned. Focus your mind on defeating me.”

In contrast to Lay, who was carefully calculating the distance between us, I was pushing forward somewhat aggressively. The next instant, Initio flashed before me.

“Of course, that goes without saying!”

Now on the offensive, Lay launched a flurry of attacks, each one aimed at the Absorption Band on my left arm.

“Too easy.”

I moved to catch the blade in the palm of my hand, but Initio veered in another direction, targeting my left arm itself. I stiffened my muscles, bracing for impact as I thrust my sword forward.

Fresh blood sprayed through the air. Initio sank into my arm as my blade pierced Lay’s shoulder. He twisted on the spot to push Initio further, adding the force to his thrust to dig the blade into the bone.

“You failed to finish me off. That mistake will cost you your life.”

I swung my adamantine sword. Lay spun around in an attempt to duck, but he

was unable to fully evade the attack. My blade grazed his neck, and blood gushed out.

No, that was wrong. Lay's expression was cool as he continued moving his sword—he had taken that attack on purpose. He must have realized he had no chance of victory over me without sacrificing something of his own.

Initio flashed, and blood poured from my left arm.

Simultaneously, my sword slashed Lay's waist.

"Did you think you could beat me in a contest of endurance?" I asked.

"You never know until you try," Lay retorted.

Initio and my adamantite sword clashed yet again, slicing our bodies further. Unlike our earlier exchanges, each crossing of our blades opened up fresh wounds on our bodies.

Slicing through flesh, separating bone from bone—that was what Lay sought to accomplish.

We continued exchanging our deadliest attacks, evading only the fatal wounds. Our injuries multiplied by the second, blood flowing freely from our veins, but the two of us were laughing.

"Well done, Lay. You've improved since our last confrontation."

"The same goes for you. I thought I'd surpassed you since last time, but there's no end to your strength after all."

There was no resentment, no desire for glory. That's right—we were merely having fun. The crossing of swords, the exchange of blades, and every drop of blood were a joy for us. I was delighted by Lay's frightful ability to exceed his own limitations with every passing moment, while Lay seemed reverent towards my seemingly limitless power.

The Royalists, the Demon Sword Tournament, even Avos Dilhevia—none of them existed. The only thing that mattered was the elegant dance taking place on the stage to the accompaniment of clashing metal.

A long, long exchange of swords ensued. The spectators, no longer able to comment on the match, watched the rapidly shifting battle with bated breath.

Thirty minutes passed, then an hour. Lay and I were still exchanging blows. We were probably wishing for the same thing: that these moments would last for eternity.

But alas, the end was nigh. We both knew it was time to finish this.

“Guh...”

My slash tore through Lay’s right foot, sending him to his knees. In doing so, I received a deep gash across my left arm.

“Hmm. It seems I can barely lift it.”

Using his sword for support, Lay rose to his feet.

“It’s over, Lay. I had fun.”

“Same here. This is the end of it for me too.”

With our swords at the ready, we took a simultaneous step forward. Lay aimed at my left arm, probably intending to slip past my sluggish movements to destroy the Absorption Band. I, meanwhile, only had one goal—

But just as we came within reach of one another—before our swords could even cross—it happened.

“Lay!”

Someone called out Lay’s name. I could see the caller from the corner of my eye. Halfway up the stands—right beside the exit—was Lay’s mother, Sheila. Misa was beside her.

“Anos!”

Initio gleamed in Lay’s hand. I forcefully raised my arm to avoid the swing aimed at the Absorption Band, but as I did so, his demon sword flipped over and swung down, digging in below my shoulder.

It was a perfectly timed attack, gauged for the exact moment my muscles relaxed. In the next breath, my severed arm was sailing through the air.

This must have been Lay’s goal from the beginning. He glared at the Absorption Band that adorned my falling arm.

“To think you could take my entire arm. I’m impressed, Lay.”

Before he could slash at the armband, I thrust my own sword forward. He promptly blocked it with the flat of his blade.

“But it’s my victory.”

The moment the tip of my sword made contact, I poured all my magic into Adesin, forcing the adamantine sword forward.

Right then, something was triggered.

A vast magic circle appeared on the arena stage and was immediately activated. The spell...

“Gyak...ah...”

Initio snapped in two, and my sword pierced Lay’s chest.

“As expected... And here I was thinking I’d win this time...” Lay smiled in satisfaction. Then, he staggered backwards and fell onto his back.

But there were no cheers to be heard.

The magic circle that had appeared onstage was that of the dimensional prison spell, Azesith. The space we had frequented had been transported to another dimension and was now isolated from Delsgade.

“Oh, how I’ve awaited this moment,” a hoarse voice uttered. “At last, the day has come to do away with you, my liege.”

A white-bearded old man appeared. It was the Demon Elder Melheis Boran.



§ 32. Betrayal

“Let me get this straight, Melheis,” I said to the old man. “Both the sword pact embedded in Lay and the Demon Sword Tournament were your doing. The only reason you’re a Unitarian is to keep the Royalists in check—when the balance of power tips too far in their favor, demons like Emilia end up running amok.”

Melheis nodded civilly. “That would be correct.”

“Your source hasn’t been taken over by another. Whose order are you following? Or are you moving of your own will?”

Melheis didn’t answer. When I’d checked, he had possessed no memory of me. Was that why it was so easy for him to betray me? Or had he been aware of everything from the beginning but had hidden his memories somehow? Or was there something else to it entirely?

I continued my questioning. “The Unitarians answer to an anonymous demon. Is that Avos Dilhevia?”

“Did you think I would answer your questions?”

Well, no. But...

“Very well. I’ll force it out of you.”

“I’m afraid that won’t be possible, Lord Anos.”

“Oh? That’s a bold statement. Did you think you could win by sealing me away with Azesith?”

“No. I *know* I have already won. My victory was decided while you were fooling around onstage. By then, the battle had already begun. Only, you were too distracted by sentimentality to realize it.”

Melheis drew a magic circle and reached inside, pulling out the Demon King’s scepter. It should have been stored at the Demon King Academy, but a Demon Elder would have had no issue accessing it there.

“An arm severed by Initio is not easily healed.”

Melheis was right. Initio’s spell-cutting effect lingered for some time, making it pointless to cast healing magic for the time being. I could heal my left arm once enough time had passed, but Melheis wasn’t about to sit around and wait for me to do so. He had chosen to appear the exact moment my arm had been severed, after all.

“By now, the Absorption Band will have drained over half of your power, and within Azesith, you can expect no help from your followers.”

Particles of magic gathered to my left and right, forming magic gateways from which two men appeared: Demon Elders Gaios Anzem and Ydol Anzeo.

“Hmph. Looks like it’s time for payback,” Gaios said, the Supreme Demon Sword Grajetian resting over his shoulder.

“He’s still the founder, Gaios. Don’t let your guard down,” Ydol warned, holding the demon swords of fire and ice, Zeth and Ides, in his hands.

Both Gaios and Ydol’s demon swords had been destroyed by Lay and me during our training session, but I supposed there were plenty of ways to restore them.

“Now do you understand?” Melheis taunted. “You’re up against three of the Seven Demon Elders. Not even you stand a chance.”

I snorted. “Ha! Three against one, is it? Don’t you know how to count, Melheis?”

“What are you say—”

Grajetian fell from Gaios’s hand, skewering the ground with a heavy thunk. Gaios followed, collapsing where he stood.

“Gaios...?”

Next, Ydol’s head was separated from his neck. I immediately cast Rivide on the two corpses, freezing time at the moment after their deaths.

“Wh-What is this?!”

A blade flashed past. Melheis cast a magic gate and disappeared through it.

The blade sliced through the empty air, and Melheis reappeared further away.

“Looks like three in one go was too much.”

Melheis looked in the direction of the voice to see Lay with the adamantine sword.

“Lay Grandsley... You’re supposed to be dead.”

“The sword pact was meant to bore deeper into Lay’s source when he lost to me, no? If that had happened, he wouldn’t be able to reincarnate. But that is only a problem if the pact is in his body.”

Melheis gasped in realization. “You pretended to pierce his heart...when you were actually destroying the pact?”

“I figured there’d be a trick to the finals. If someone were to target me, they’d exploit the moment I was most focused on something else—in other words, they’d exploit the finishing blow. When you swallowed me with Azesith and believed yourself victorious, you took your Eyes off of Lay. I merely took advantage of that opportunity.”

The Demon Elder glared at us with a grim expression.

“Did you think I’d let you observe me so freely, Melheis?”

“There were no signs of the two of you colluding... Lay Grandsley fought you earnestly.”

“I was earnest,” Lay agreed. “I fought Anos with everything I had so that I could protect him. I was prepared to destroy the Absorption Band and lose my mother. My desire to strike him down was genuine.”

“Then why did you let him destroy the pact the instant I looked away?”

“We weren’t in cahoots. I just believed he’d transcend everything even if I faced him with all my might. And that’s what he did.”

“Wha...” Melheis opened his mouth but fell speechless.

“It seems you made a miscalculation, Melheis,” I said. “Did you really think such a minor handicap would be enough to distract me?”

Melheis glared silently in response.

“It was no big deal, really. I defended myself, protected the Absorption Band, and took on Lay with all my might. All the while, I fought with you outside the ring, and I won both matches at once.”

Melheis looked incredulous.

“You said I was too busy fooling around onstage to notice you,” I said with a smirk, “but did you really think I’d lose my composure over a petty plot like this? I will not allow you to disrupt my match with Lay. Nor will I let you kill Sheila. Your schemes are child’s play for me to deal with. Nothing more.”

I took one step forward.

“I admit I may have misjudged you,” Melheis muttered. “But that’s all there is to it. With adequate preparation, any unforeseen circumstance can be dealt with.”

Melheis cast a magic gate before him. Doing so allowed him to connect the Azesith bubble with another space and to move freely between them.

“Running from me?”

“Not at all. I may have made a slight miscalculation, but that doesn’t negate my victory.”

The gate slowly opened, revealing a figure on the other side.

Lay frowned. “Mom...”

Sheila, who should have been amongst the audience, was now on the other side of the gate, bound by the chains of Gijel. Her spiritosis seemed to have worsened, as she was unconscious.

“Why do you think I allowed her to recover enough to visit Delsgade, hm?” Melheis drew a magic circle. Dozens of red gemstones appeared and began floating in the air around us. “For each gemstone I shatter, one of the memories forming the foundation of her source will disappear.”

Melheis flicked his finger, destroying one of the red gemstones. I turned my Eyes to Sheila, confirming her magic had indeed weakened.

Lent, huh? The destruction of the gemstones was linked to Neria, a spell that would wipe the memories of people who knew Sheila’s lore of origin. There

were a total of forty-six gemstones—one for each person who knew, I assumed.

“I’m sure you understand the rest. Now, shall we move on to negotiations?”

Lay glanced at me briefly.

“The kind where I offer something in exchange for Sheila’s life, you mean?” I asked.

“Yes.” Melheis nodded, then cast two new magic gates to swallow Sheila and the gemstones, sending them to another dimension. “If you sign a Zecht with me, I shall save her.”

He probably figured it was easier to control me with Zecht than to kill me.

“Hmm. Then kill her.”

Melheis looked at me in confusion. “Perhaps I misheard you. May I ask that you repeat yourself?”

“If you wish to kill her, go ahead,” I repeated, causing Melheis to fall silent. Then I lowered my tone in warning. “But I advise you do so with great caution. Once the hostage is dead, there’ll be nothing left to protect you.”

Melheis looked towards Lay. “Lay Grandsley, are you content with your mother being sacrificed?”

“I was prepared for that outcome to begin with. Mom wouldn’t want me to surrender my life for hers.”

Melheis was at a loss for words. He probably hadn’t expected us to disregard the hostage so readily.

“Did you think a bluff would fool me?” he asked.

“See for yourself.”

Melheis’s searching gaze fixed upon me.

“What’s wrong? Get on with it. Don’t tell me you took a hostage you can’t kill,” I taunted, taking a step forward.

In response, Melheis raised his right hand. A magic circle appeared there, which formed another gate. “It seems I must demonstrate my sincerity.” He took five gemstones from the gate and destroyed them. “Now, how long do you

think her body will last?”

I responded to him in an unaffected manner. “Only five?”

“What...?”

“What are you so afraid of? If you’re going to destroy them, it would be much more efficient to break all of them at once. Or are you afraid I’ll finish you the moment you’re done?”

“You’ll regret this.” Melheis retrieved twenty more gemstones from the gate. “This surpasses half.”

“What about the remaining twenty-one?”

He stared at me silently.

“Just who do you think you’re fighting, Melheis?” I asked, glaring at him menacingly. “Did you really think you could control me with a mere hostage?”

I channeled my magic into a circle, giving him a brief glimpse of a black sun.

“You don’t seem to have realized it yet, so I’ll spell it out for you: you handed me your life the moment you revealed yourself.”

Melheis reflexively braced himself, readying himself for combat.

The next instant, Lay flung the adamantine sword. “Hah!”

“How pathetic...” Melheis muttered, brushing it away with ease. “If you resist any further, your mother will truly be—” He broke off as he looked back at us, a stern frown crossing his face.

In the second Melheis had been distracted, Lay had dived through the magic gate that had swallowed Sheila while I’d dashed after the gemstones.

§ 33. A Spirit's True Form

Having sped through the gate, I found myself on a near-identical arena stage with a matching magic circle at its center. Neither Lay nor Melheis were anywhere to be seen, as this was yet another dimension.

I looked around and spotted the red gemstones scattered across the ground.

"If you believe you've outsmarted me, you should probably think again, Lord Anos," came Melheis's voice. He wasn't here in person—this space was within the dimensional prison he had created—but it was easy enough to project one's voice into another dimension. "There should always be multiple layers to a trap."

Magic gates appeared around me on all sides. Each opened to reveal a black aurora—a wall of devastation that glowed ominously with seemingly limitless power. The aurora spread swiftly across the stage, where it loomed as though ready to strike.

In response, I cast anti-magic on myself and the scattered gemstones. The aurora clashed against it with a violent boom, breaking through the first layer almost instantly. I swiftly restored the wards, then reinforced them with further magic, but it burst apart as fast as I'd done so.

This black aurora was significantly stronger than the magic of Ivis when he had fused with Eugo La Raviaz. The only way to protect the gemstones was to continually cast anti-magic over them.

"Hmm. This magic is rather familiar," I said. There was something about the wavelength of the aurora's magic that brought back memories. Memories of two thousand years ago, that is. "This is the wall I used to split the world into four."

"That is correct. This is the spell you sacrificed your life for—the spell that was cast through the combined efforts of the Goddess of Creation, the Great Spirit, the Hero, and the Demon King. Or as you know it, Beno levun."

No wonder it was so powerful. Beno levun repelled everything and anything with utter destruction. Being consumed by the wall usually spelled one's end.

"So you captured the wall in Azesith before it faded."

Melheis must have kept Beno levun from disappearing by continuously supplying it with magic. It was certainly possible, considering that he had had enough power to cross the wall.

"Yes. But with my strength, I could only maintain it, not control it. That is why I required your magic."

I see. The purpose of the Absorption Band hadn't been to drain my magic to weaken me, but to control Beno levun. The spell wasn't meant to be mobile, but if it was being kept within Azesith, it could be freely transferred through magic gates and used as an attack.

"I must commend you, Lord Anos. Most newly reborn demons can only access a tenth of their former power. The fact that you've regained all of yours in a mere month or so is notable. You would have been helpless before Beno levun without it."

"You seem rather talkative today, Melheis. But did you really think you could defeat me with my own magic?"

"Not if you were in prime condition, no. But with one arm left and half your power drained, how do you intend to protect twenty-one gemstones as well as yourself? Even the Demon King of Tyranny would struggle under such circumstances."

"You think so?"

"Then just to be sure, allow me to introduce one more factor."

Limnet appeared before me, showing me the image of a remote location. It was the arena of another dimension—the one where Lay was holding Sheila in his arms.

"*Beno levun*," Melheis uttered.

A black aurora rose around Lay. He reflexively reached for his waist, but there was no sword to be found. Initio had been destroyed and the adamantine

sword flung at Melheis.

“It seems your friend isn’t the best at magic. I wonder how he’ll fare unarmed.”

The black aurora swooped down on Lay and Sheila. Without a sword, Lay had no means of defending himself.

But before the wall could reach them, an anti-magic barrier was deployed before them.

“Astounding,” Melheis remarked. “You actually traced Limnet’s magic to cast a ward in another dimension. Most impressive. But it’s only a matter of time before you use up all your power.”

Hmm. He had a point. Nothing would change by casting anti-magic like this.

I decided to send Lay a cross-dimensional message over Leaks.

“Lay, can you hear me?”

“Anos...? Is this barrier yours?”

“Yes. But it seems I’ve used a little too much magic. Can you do something about Beno levun—that black aurora?”

Lay nodded firmly. “Can you make me a sword?”

“It won’t last long,” I warned, using Iris to create a demon sword.

Lay immediately grasped it. Sharpening his senses, he fixed his gaze on the aurora before him—then thrust the sword forward in a flash, aiming directly at the weakest point of the spell formula.

“Hah...!”

The black aurora was severed for a brief moment before returning to its original shape. It then swooped down with a vengeance.

Lay intercepted the attack with another sweep of his sword, but the blade shattered to pieces upon impact. With so much of my power being expended on anti-magic, the sword I’d made had stood no chance.

“It seems you’ve reached your limit, Lord Anos,” Melheis remarked triumphantly. “Beno levun is growing denser by the minute.”

True to Melheis's words, the density of the black aurora was increasing, and the time the wall was taking to destroy my wards was getting shorter. He was probably sending more and more of Benollevun into this dimension, raising its destructive force.

"This spell... Benollevun, was it? I can feel your magic from it," Lay observed.

"I'll spare you the details, but I cast the spell two thousand years ago at the cost of my life. Melheis somehow managed to seize control of it."

"No wonder it's so strong." Lay glared at the aurora. "Anos, can you remove the magic protecting me and use it to make a stronger sword?"

"It's possible. But if you expose yourself to Benollevun without protection, you'll die."

Lay grinned carelessly. "At this rate, I'll die anyway. I just have to slay it before then."

Each time he clashed with the wall, the man would grow stronger. He might even have already figured something out during his last attempt.

"Cut it down in point five seconds. I cannot guarantee you any longer than that."

I created another demon sword before Lay, who immediately grabbed it.

"Ready?" I asked.

"Whenever you are."

"Then here goes."

I took down the wards protecting Lay and redirected the magic into the sword. The blade became far sturdier.

"Hyah...!" Lay cried, swinging his sword down on the rapidly approaching curtain.

The blade of the sword gleamed, and the black aurora was split in two. But it immediately snapped back to its original shape and continued baring its fangs at the defenseless Lay.

"Hah!" Lay projected his sword forward, slicing into the aurora once again.

Then, before it could return to its original shape, he cut the two parts into four. Four turned into eight; eight turned into sixteen, then more, and the wall was minced into pieces.

But no matter how many times he cut it, Beno levun's magic failed to wane. In fact, it was returning to its original state with even more force than before.

Just then, Lay missed a fragment of the aurora, and with that, the situation flipped. The jet-black mass cracked the demon sword. When Lay next moved to swing it, the blade snapped, and blood spurted from his body.

"Gah... Agh..."

I recast a barrier as he fell to his knees.

"I...was so close..." he panted, attempting to get back on his feet, but he was unable to muster the strength and instead toppled to the ground. "Huh? That's odd... My body won't..."

It was to be expected after fighting me not so long ago.

"Stay focused. Your own anti-magic is weakening," I told him.

"I know, but..." From his position face-up on the floor, Lay seemed unable to move. He attempted to clench his fist but failed. "That was the last of...my strength..."

Lay exhaled deeply. "Anos," he said, gazing upwards, "this is it for me. Can you look after my mom?"

He was asking me to use the magic I was putting into protecting him to escape this situation instead.

"It's still too early to give in. Stand up."

"My body won't move. Even if I could stand, I don't have the strength to cut Beno levun. I'm no match for you after all," he said, closing his eyes in resignation.

Hmm. It seemed he truly had reached his limit. But—

"You... You can do it..." came a voice that interrupted my thoughts.

"Mom...?"

The voice belonged to Lay's mother. "It's not the end, Lay. I believe in you. You've always loved the sword..."

Sheila's murmurs were almost unintelligible. Her spiritosis must have worsened after so many memories had been erased. Yet despite that...

"Sorry, mom... My body's already..."

"Don't worry, Lay. It'll be okay. I'll protect you. I'll be your strength."

"My strength...?"

A pale light enveloped Sheila's body, and her silhouette began to distort.

Spirits possessed both a transient form and true form. I hadn't been sure if half spirits also possessed a true form, but it seemed that Sheila was about to reveal hers.

Afflicted by spiritosis, Sheila was on the verge of disappearing. It was hard to believe she still possessed strength enough to show her true form. Still, she was squeezing every last ounce of power from her source for the sake of her beloved son.

The pale light shone brighter and brighter, then disappeared all at once. Sheila's true form was revealed before our eyes—a sword with a blade of exceptional sharpness.

If the Great Water Spirit Lignon's true form was an eight-headed water dragon, then Sheila's true form was this sword. The blade looked awfully similar to the adamantite sword dad had forged, but the power it was emitting was incomparably greater.

I see. That explained everything. In that case, there was no need for me to interfere.

"On your feet, Lay. You can still fight. I didn't raise a son who gives up so easily."

Lay sat up slowly. "Mom..."

Spurring his uncooperative body into moving, he reached out and grasped Sheila's hilt. The light of the sword spread to envelop his body as though to protect him.

“You can do it, Lay. I know you can. There’s nothing you can’t cut.”

Lay nodded, then got to his feet. From there, he faced Beno levun, holding his sword at the ready.

“Are you sure about this, Lay Grandsley?” Melheis asked threateningly. “Using that sword will trigger a fate far worse than spiritosis. Your mother will be removed from this world forever.”

There was no doubt about that—even the use of spirit magic was enough to endanger a half spirit. The result of Sheila using her true form in such a weakened state was clear.

“A half spirit with an unstable source can only use their true power once. Will you kill your mother with your own hands?”

If Melheis was threatening him this much, there must have been something about Sheila’s power that he was wary of. That, or there was an actual possibility Lay could slay Beno levun.

“You’re wrong,” Sheila said quietly. “I’m the one protecting him. For my precious child, I’ll throw aside my life as many times as it takes.”

Sheila’s glow grew brighter. She burned fiercely, intensely, fleetingly, like a comet reaching its end.

“Say, Lay, do you still remember?” she asked gently, reminiscing in her final moments.

“Remember what, mom?”

“The cooking lesson I gave you when you were little. You picked up the kitchen knife and tried to cut the pot.”

Lay smiled. “I remember that.”

“I told you it was impossible. But you just wouldn’t listen, swinging the knife up and down over and over again. Then, out of nowhere, the pot split straight down the middle. I was so shocked.” Even in her sword form, it was evident Sheila was laughing. “I thought about scolding you, but you were so pleased about it. I realized you must have a real fascination with swords and the like.”

“Yeah,” Lay replied gently.

“Say, now that you’re bigger, you can cut through anything, right? Do you think you can show me?”

Lay nodded slowly. “Sure, mom. Just watch.”

He quietly closed his eyes to focus, holding the sword in a natural stance. With that innocent smile of his, he looked like a child with a toy—a child charmed by a sword. He had traced the memories of his mother and returned to his childhood.

He took a breath, then held it.

One step later, he exhaled. The sword gleamed in his hand. Like a ray of light dispelling the darkness, his shining blade slashed Beno levun apart. Before the black aurora could return to its original form, he cut through the fragments thoroughly, dispersing them one by one.

How many slashes did he make in the span of that breath? It was like watching an endless meteor shower. The fearsome sequence of strikes cut Beno levun apart until it was completely eradicated.

But Lay did not stop there.

“Anos!”

Hearing his voice, I connected our dimensions with magic.

“Hyaaaaaah!”

The flash of the blade shot out like a meteor, stretching into my current dimension and clearing away the black aurora. In mere seconds, the Beno levun around me had been eliminated.

“Phew...” Lay sighed, finally letting out his breath. From what I could see, the light of the sword in his hands was so weak, it was about to disappear. “How was that, mom?” he asked.

The outline of the sword distorted as Sheila reverted to her transient form. Her body was nearly completely transparent, and she was hovering slightly above the ground.

She touched a hand to Lay’s cheek. “You’ve become a fine young man, Lay... Thank you for letting me be your mother...”

Her body was fading into particles of light, but she put on her brightest smile.

“I love you...”

Lay reached out to hug her, but his hands grasped at thin air. His mother had vanished, whisked away like the wind.

“Mom...” Tears welled up in Lay’s eyes as he gazed at the remnants of light, his words overflowing from the bottom of his heart. “There was so much I still wanted to do for you... Things I still wanted to do together...” He trailed off, his voice almost disappearing as he lowered his head. “I’m sorry. I couldn’t do anything...”

A single tear spilled down his cheek.

“I understand how you’re feeling, Lay. But it’s far too early to be crying.”

He raised his head at my words.

“Save those tears for your reunion. You can demonstrate your filial piety when this is over.”

§ 34. The Demon King's True Power

"Anos, my mother's—"

The image of Lay was cut short. Limnet had been forcibly terminated.

"Hmm. That was a hasty dispelling, but you're too late, Melheis," I informed the Demon Elder.

"Oh? I wouldn't be so sure of that. All space within Azesith is my territory. Not even you can come and go between dimensions without a point of orientation."

Beno levun reappeared around me.

"As you can see, I have an ample supply of Beno levun. So what do you think? Will the great Lay Grandsley have the means to defend himself without a sword? Now that I've suspended Limnet, you're no longer able to deploy anti-magic in his dimension."

"And?"

"I'm sure you've realized it by now—there's been a change of hostage. Your and Lay Grandsley's actions were meaningless in the end. His mother died in vain."

"Oh? But it's thanks to those meaningless actions that I've gained an advantage: I can strike you from where I stand."

"Your bluffs can no longer fool me. If you agree to this Zecht, I shall spare Lay Grandsley's life."

A contract appeared before me—one that said something about forfeiting the totality of my power in exchange for Lay's life.

"You have three seconds. Three," Melheis said, beginning his threatening countdown. "Two."

"Perhaps you should take a look behind you, Melheis."

"That won't fool me," he said, ignoring my warning to continue counting.

“One. Zer— Urgh... Gah?!”

“You should have heeded my advice, Melheis. Now I’ve caught you.”

With a direct grip on Melheis’s magic, I cast Gatom to traverse dimensions. My vision turned white, and before I knew it, Melheis appeared before me, my detached left arm tightly clasping his right shoulder.

“Impossible... Initio should have suspended your arm’s circulation of magic for some time... What kind of spell is this...?”

“Spell? What are you saying? Did you think that severing my arm would be enough to stop me from moving it?”

“Gah... That’s absurd...”

Melheis opened a magic gate and fled the dimension. I used Gatom to promptly follow him, appearing right beside him in the next dimension he arrived at.

“You should do something about that arm if you wish to run away.”

With a point of orientation within my grasp, I could traverse the dimensional prison freely. I could also have done so earlier, but it would’ve been rather troublesome if Melheis had fled, so I’d instead waited for the perfect opportunity to seize him.

“Well then...how about this?” Melheis asked, disappearing through another magic gate.

I immediately used Gatom to pursue him.

The next moment, a black aurora filled my vision—Beno levun of far greater quantity than before. The wall swooped down to attack me.

I cloaked myself in anti-magic to resist the surging mass. The resulting clap of bursting magic resounded around us.

“This is where I store the Beno levun I captured.”

Straining my Eyes, I could see Melheis on the other side of the aurora. Only the area where he was standing was devoid of Beno levun.

“Believing I had no choice but to flee, you blindly followed me to your own

demise. It's over, Lord Anos. All the arrangements are in place."

Melheis swung the scepter, strengthening Beno levun with his magic to further compress me. The walls I had used to split the world into four were now being ordered to crush me.

"Your arrogance got the better of you. You believed your victory was assured. I, meanwhile, was merely waiting for your magic to fall below the level of that which I had accumulated here. As a parting gift, let me reveal to you the root of your defeat: that arrogant attitude of yours!"

Good grief, this Demon Elder sure liked to talk. But he was justified in his confidence this time—if I let down my defenses, I would be erased in an instant.

"It's futile. Think about it. The Absorption Band has drained half your power. Considering the magic you have already expended, only a third of your strength should remain. Moreover, half of that siphoned magic is now stored within this scepter."

The power he spoke of burst forth, destroying my wards one after another.

"Even a child could determine the winner between fifty percent and thirty percent of the same power. And with the addition of my own magic to that fifty percent, I can eliminate any chance of your victory!"

Even with all of my power streaming into my defenses, Beno levun was dense enough to crush them. The black aurora formed an orb around my body, which began to shrink with each passing moment.

"Oh? I thought you'd be obliterated on the spot, but that's the Demon King of Tyranny for you. Anyhow, you won't last much longer in your state."

Melheis poured the magic from the scepter into Beno levun, intending to finish me off. The black sphere emitted an ominous light as it compressed to crush me and my wards.

"Farewell, my liege, Lord Anos Voldigoad."

Light began to seep through the gaps in Beno levun, which had compressed so much that it could no longer maintain its spherical form.

The next moment, the black orb imploded.

“Your time has come to an end. In fact, it ended two thousand years ago.”

With his enemy erased, Melheis gazed at the aftermath of the aurora as though to bask in his victory.

“Hmm. Go on; I’d love to hear more.”

His eyes widened. “What...?!”

The light and aurora faded completely, revealing me standing at the point of implosion. I was completely unharmed.

“H-How...?” Melheis gaped, unable to process the situation.

“Oh, it’s nothing really. I just finally settled into my new body.”

His jaw dropped further in shock. “I-It can’t be...” he muttered weakly. “So you weren’t able to use your true power this whole time. How... How is that possible? You used so much of your magic up till now, yet you still hadn’t regained your strength from before your reincarnation?!”

“As you cared to inform me earlier, I had less than one tenth of my strength available to me.”

“Less than...one tenth...”

The despair in Melheis’s expression was almost pitiable. In short, the power he had stolen from me was less than ten percent of my full potential.

“You should have challenged me sooner instead of buying time that allowed me to settle into this body,” I said, holding out my hand.

With my current power, I could do this. Black particles of light gathered in my palm, gradually increasing until an infinite number filled the room.

“That’s...the three-dimensional magic circle of Delsgade... That’s impossible! We’re inside Azesith, a completely separate dimension!”

“Come, Venuzdonoa.”

At my call, innumerable particles of black light gathered at my feet, forming the shadow of a sword. There was no object projecting the shadow—it existed by itself.

“You said my actions were meaningless, Melheis. You told me to think about

it.” The shadow rose slowly from the ground, as though it was drawn to my hand. “Let me teach you what true meaninglessness looks like.”

Melheis stared at me in disbelief, seemingly deaf to my words. “What... What is this...?”

“A space or dimension created by magic means nothing. Venuzdonoa, the Abolisher of Reason, reduces all logic to null. There is no point in thinking of what, how, or why.”

I grasped the sword by its hilt. At that moment, the shadow inverted to reveal a longsword the color of darkness.

“All enemies fall before me. That is the only reason Venuzdonoa allows.”

“N-Not even the Demon King of Tyranny can use such nonsensical magic!”

Melheis cast another gate before himself. This one was far more extravagant in appearance compared to the others until now.

“Oh? An unconditional space, is it?”

“That is correct. Everything past this gate is under the absolute control of the caster. It is impossible to defeat me inside Azesith.”

The magic gate opened, and Melheis disappeared through it.

“I shall take my leave for today, Lord Anos, and devise another plan after taking into consideration the full extent of your power. Please look forward to it.”

I held Venuzdonoa in a low stance. “How unfortunate, Melheis.”

Then I swung the Abolisher of Reason. The space before me split open, revealing Melheis in his separate dimension.

“H-How did you...?! This space is completely isolated from the world! It should be impossible for you to tamper with it from outside, much less cut it...”

“Logic means nothing before the Abolisher of Reason.”

I walked slowly up to Melheis and swung Venuzdonoa. He evaded at the last moment, but his legs were sliced clean off, sending him rolling across the ground.

“What? I’m sure I evaded the attack!”

“Did you think you could evade it by dodging?”

“That... That can’t be...!” He deployed more magic gates around himself, this time numbering several thousand. “That demon sword may be fearsome, but it’s still just a sword! It can’t destroy this many gates at once!”

Using the huge number of magic gates as decoys, Melheis chose one through which to flee. But just before he could do so, the thousands of magic gates shattered all at once.

“Wha... What is this? You didn’t even cut through them...”

“Did you think I needed to cut the gates for them to be severed?”

“That’s absurd...”

I walked slowly up to the bewildered man, taking my place beside him. His expression was a mix of horror and despair.

“It makes no sense. How could this be possible...?”

“Carve this into that cunning little brain of yours. This is what true meaninglessness looks like.”

And so, I thrust Venuzdonoa through Melheis’s head.

§ 35. Sinister Mask

“Guh... Ack... Haah...” Melheis groaned in anguish. Although Venuzdonoa had pierced his head, he was still able to cling to life.

“Hmm. Look at this pesky thing you’ve got buried in here.”

Along with Venuzdonoa, embedded in Melheis’s brain was a demon sword shackle—a magic item that took absolute control of its bearer, right down to their very thoughts.

“Perish.”

The device was decimated by my sword.

I pulled Venuzdonoa from Melheis’s skull, and he gazed at me with vacant eyes.

Eventually, light returned to his gaze.

“Have you returned to your senses, Melheis?”

He lowered his head in shame. “Please accept my sincerest apologies, Lord Anos... After our last meeting, I suffered an embarrassing defeat...”

Back when I’d checked in the union tower, Melheis had possessed no memories of me, which was why it had been strange for him to be so dead set on my demise. Of course, I had considered the possibility of him hiding his memories from me somehow, but that was most likely what Avos Dilhevia wanted me to believe to lure me into eliminating one of my own allies. This would confirm that Melheis truly didn’t remember me and that the shackle had been implanted afterwards.

Considering Lay had also had a magic item implanted in him, the possibility of something similar happening to Melheis had already crossed my mind.

“Who is responsible for this?”

Melheis shook his head regretfully. “I am unsure... I never saw a face or detected any magic. It happened the night after I met you—I didn’t even have a

chance to use the Beno levun I had prepared after I was attacked all those years ago.”

So two thousand years ago, after Melheis had crossed the wall to escape the pursuit of Avos Dilhevia’s subordinate, he had stored it away in preparation for future attacks. That very same wall had then been used with the intent to kill me. I could only assume the other side knew that Melheis was strong and so had prepared accordingly.

I stabbed Venuzdonoa into the ground. The sword body disappeared, leaving only a shadow at my feet. This was its sheathed form.

“It’s about time for Initio’s effect to wear off.”

The left arm clinging to Melheis’s shoulder released its grip and fell to the floor. I picked it up with my right hand and pressed it up against my left shoulder to reattach it, wiggling my fingers once it was in place.

Hmm. All in working order.

“Summon Gaios and Ydol.”

“Yes, my liege.”

Melheis cast two magic gates, transferring Gaios and Ydol’s corpses into our current dimension.

“What will you do with them?” he asked.

“Apart from you, each of the Seven Demon Elders has had their source fused with another.”

Melheis contemplated this for a moment. “Is it the work of Avos Dilhevia’s subordinates?”

“Yes.”

Back when I’d fought Ivis, I had had no choice but to destroy the foreign source, but that wasn’t the case this time.

“The sources of two of Avos Dilhevia’s subordinates are right here with us.”

I drew a magic circle around Gaios and Ydol’s bodies. Using Ji Gurr, I separated the fused sources from the originals.

“If they were ranked highly enough to be chosen to take over the bodies of two Demon Elders, they should have some insight into Avos Dilhevia’s intentions.”

The status of the Seven Demon Elders allowed these subordinates to take direct control of the legend of the Demon King of Tyranny. It was hard to imagine they were following orders with no knowledge of the situation. In fact, there was even a chance I’d see some familiar faces after reviving their sources.

Once Ji Gurr had finished separating the sources, I spilled two drops of my blood.

“Return to life, foolish ones who rise against me. Reveal yourselves.”

I drew the magic circle for Ingall. The success rate of resurrection fell with the passing of time after death, but I had planned ahead and stopped time with Rivide.

Just then, two shock waves blasted through the dimension, ripping the space apart. The blast tore through the two foreign sources mid-resurrection, reducing the pair to nothing.

“What the...?!”

By the time Melheis cried out, my gaze had already snapped to the direction from which the attack had come. A man in a sinister mask was standing there, his body adorned in black armor. The mask was some kind of magic item, making it impossible to detect his magic even when I strained my Eyes. No wonder I hadn’t noticed him until the attack.

“That’s impossible. He forced his way into Azesith from outside...” Melheis muttered in confusion. Moving around within the space was far simpler than forcing one’s way inside.

“Hmm. You must be Avos Dilhevia.”

The masked man offered no response.

“A quiet one, huh? Let’s see if I can convince you to speak.”

I held out my hand. The shadow by my feet rose, reforming the shape of a sword.

The man's hand blurred. A tear appeared within Azesith, and he promptly disappeared through it.

"Melheis."

"His lack of magic makes him difficult to trace...but I don't believe he's inside Azesith any longer. He's already fled."

So he didn't want to take his chances against Venuzdonoa. He must have been watching the fight between Melheis and me. If he had been one second slower, he would have fallen victim to the Abolisher of Reason, so he had definitely made the wise decision.

His goal must have been to destroy the sources fused with Gaios and Ydol, preventing them from leaking any information.

"What should we do?" Melheis asked. "We may still be able to catch up to him."

"It's fine. Let him go."

Now was not the time to be pursuing him. That masked man must have realized that as well and had planned his actions accordingly.

"I will give you your orders later. For now, resurrect Gaios and Ydol."

The masked man had only destroyed the sources of Avos Dilhevia's subordinates. Gaios and Ydol's own sources were unharmed. Like the others, they probably had no memories of me, but they should resurrect just fine.

"Understood."

I thrust Venuzdonoa into the ground, changing it back to a shadow that soon faded. A magic gate then opened before me, revealing the adamantine sword.

"Is this what you require?" Melheis asked.

"Yes," I said, grasping its hilt.

"This gate will lead you back to the arena. I will set Lay Grandsley free there."

I nodded and marched through the gate.

Space distorted around me as I walked down what seemed to be a passageway. Before long, voices reached my ears.

“Hey... What’s going on?”

“No idea. I can’t see or hear anything with that spell blocking the stage.”

“There haven’t been any announcements either. What happened to the match?”

“Ah, hang on. Look over there! That’s a person!”

“Oh, it is... The spell must have worn off. There’s someone standing there—and someone else on the ground!”

“So it’s settled, then.”

“But who won...?”

The magic circle disappeared from the stage, dispelling Azesith and revealing the aftermath of our battle. I was still standing, the adamantine sword in hand, as Lay lay flat on the ground beside the broken Initio.

An owl’s voice sounded overhead. “Lay Grandsley’s sword has been destroyed. The winner is Anos Voldigoad!”

Cheers erupted across the arena. Mom and dad’s voices were amongst them.

“He did it! Look honey, our little Anos won!”

“Yeah... He really did it. That’s my boy...”

The fan union girls were moved to tears.

“I knew it! Lord Anos really is the strongest!”

“Yeah... That’s Lord Anos f-for you... The hottest... Waaaah...!”

“H-Hey, what are you crying for?”

“I...I’m just so touched... The rules were stacked against him, yet he won against the Royalists anyway...all without a single complaint...”

“J-Jeez, what are you getting all serious for?”

“I’m always serious!”

The stands were bursting with thundering applause. Virtually all of it came from hybrids, who were celebrating with all their joy. The cheers went on and on as they clapped and yelled themselves hoarse.

Once the spectators eventually quieted, the owl raised its voice once more. “The closing ceremony will soon commence. But first, the ceremonial demon sword will be awarded to Anos Voldigoad.”

A blue-eyed girl in a dress stepped into the arena, clutching a demon sword in both hands. She had blonde hair that fell down over her shoulders and a face that was instantly familiar.

The girl walked up to me and grinned. “Congratulations,” she said, presenting me with the ceremonial sword.

“Hmm. What are you doing here, Sasha?”

She shifted uncomfortably. “D-Don’t worry, Misha’s with your mother. Besides, you can do whatever you want now that the match is over.”

“That’s not what I’m asking.”

Sasha glared at me moodily. “You might have missed the memo, but the Necron family is actually quite distinguished. We don’t have much of a connection to swords, which makes us the most convenient figure to award the victory.”

So they were a convenient way of adding prestige to the award ceremony. Sasha was a direct descendant of one of the Seven Demon Elders, so the role must have been forced upon her.

“Go on; take it already.” Sasha shoved the demon sword at me.

“That isn’t the attitude of someone presenting an award.” I grabbed the demon sword casually.

“I’ll do it properly then...” She gazed at me, blushing. “Congratulations on your victory, Anos Voldigoad. May you always be blessed by the sword.”

Sasha squeezed her eyes shut and stretched up towards me. Her lips gently brushed my cheek.

The spectators began clapping once again, congratulating me on my victory.

“J-Just so you know...” Sasha mumbled, looking down to avoid my eyes, “this is just a tradition, okay? I’m not doing this because I want to.”

“You don’t have to tell me; I know that much.”

Sasha looked a little disappointed. “I only agreed to do this because I believed you’d win...” she mumbled weakly, still avoiding my gaze. She remained quiet for a moment, as if searching for the right words to reach me. “I had no intention of rewarding any Demon King except you...”

Those were some charming words to settle on.

“That’s a good mindset,” I said, chuckling.

“Wh-What? Ugh, you’re always so arrogant.”

Despite her complaints, Sasha had a gentle smile on her face.

“Ah!” Having remembered something, she drew a magic circle before me. It was a version of Leaks set to transmit my voice across the arena and through the magicast. “Anos Voldigoad, could you tell us how you’re feeling right now?”

“Sure.”

I had already decided on my words.

“I owe my victory to this sword,” I stated, holding the sword aloft to the crowd. “This adamantine sword, which my father forged with all his heart, possessed a power that surpassed the Demon Sword Initio. That power was different than magic—it was a power of the heart. My father is a true artisan.”

I looked towards the stands. “Thank you, dad.”

At the end of my gaze, dad looked to be desperately suppressing his emotions. I strained my ears to hear his awkward mumbles.

“J-Jeez, what is that boy saying...? Right, Izabella? He should be thanking his teachers from the school! Besides, that sword wasn’t anything special. That was all his own strength. He won because he did his best—”

Overcome with emotion, dad started blubbering. Beside him, mom was smiling, though her eyes were just as full with tears.

“Oh, Izabella... He truly is an amazing boy. I’ve never been prouder...”

Mom patted dad’s trembling back as he sobbed.

“And now,” the owl piped up, “we shall begin preparations for the closing

ceremony. All guests, please move to the throne room.”

The audience began to rise from their seats.

I looked over at Lay to see him surrounded by medics. They seemed to be struggling to treat his wounds, which weren’t responding to their healing magic.

“Step back. I’ll do it,” I said, stepping closer and casting Enchel over Lay. His wounds healed rapidly, and his eyes soon opened heavily.

“Is it over...?” Lay asked wearily, having been unconscious for quite some time.

“Nice fight,” I responded, offering him my hand. He accepted it.

“I’m glad I lost, but that’s what makes it so much more vexing.” Lay picked himself up and turned to me. “I’m going to win next time. And I’ll never fail to protect you again.”

“I look forward to it.”

We exchanged grins.

“Lay! Lord Anos...!” a panicked voice called out. I turned to see Misa rushing down the stands towards us. She was on the verge of tears. Judging from the pale look on her face, it wasn’t from being moved by my victory.

“Misa... Is everything all right?” Lay called to her worriedly.

“I’m...” Misa’s words caught in her throat.

“Yes?”

“I’m so sorry...” she mumbled. Her expression was filled with remorse. “I couldn’t protect your mother. She... She was all better, but before I knew it, she was gone...”

“Oh, there’s no need to worry about that,” I assured her.

Misa’s eyes widened in confusion.

“Sheila has recovered from her spiritosis.”

Spilling one drop of blood, I cast Ingall.

§ Epilogue: After the Festival

Sheila appeared at the center of my magic circle. She slowly opened her eyes, catching sight of the man peering down at her worriedly.

“Lay...?”

“Mom!” Lay reached for Sheila, wrapping her in a tight hug. “Thank goodness. I thought I’d never see you again...”

He hung his head, his words trailing off into tears.

Sheila petted his head as she returned the hug. “This isn’t a dream, is it? Or am I in heaven?”

“No, this is reality. You protected your son at the cost of your life. A truly admirable effort,” I replied.

“I see.”

Sheila smiled happily as she comforted Lay. She seemed more relieved at her son’s safety than her resurrection.

“But how did you cure her?” Misa asked. “No spell can return a weakened source to normal, right...?”

“It’s simple, really: I spread the lore that sustains her source.”

“Huh? But you were fighting this whole time. When did you do that?”

“Just now, when I gave my victory speech. My comment was broadcast across the whole of Dilhade.”

“Ah!” Misa gasped in realization. “A sword forged with the heart of a true artisan contains a different kind of power than magic...?”

I nodded. “That’s the lore that sustains Sheila’s spirit.”

Shattering Initio to win the Demon Sword Tournament had left a strong impression on our audience. A sword forged with the heart held a power other than magic—it was a far-fetched tale, but not entirely unbelievable. Thanks to

that, Sheila's near-vanished source had recovered rapidly, making it possible to use Ingall to resurrect her.

The three-second rule that applied to demonkind wasn't applicable here. A demon's source decayed after death, making it unable to maintain its original shape as more time passed. Sheila's source, however, had retained a relatively unchanged shape despite her faded body. Her source's shape was completely reliant on the belief that powered it.

"I can't believe you noticed that..." Misa muttered in surprise.

"When we met Sheila yesterday, her condition had improved enough for us to speak with her. I wondered if the Lognorth Magic Hospital had failed to manage the spread of her legend, but it was actually because of what I'd said during the first round."

A true artisan's heart could forge a sword with a different kind of power. That was what I'd said during my match with Kurt. It was a lie, of course, but people had believed it, leading to the improvement in Sheila's condition.

"Of course, that wasn't enough to be sure. But before the finals began, the owl spoke to me using Leaks. It told me that Sheila would die if the Absorption Band were destroyed and that Lay would die if I won the match. But it didn't mention a thing about the destruction of my sword."

That was why I'd thought Avos Dilhevia didn't care about the outcome of the tournament, but it was even more plausible to think he had purposefully left me an escape route.

The spread of Sheila's rumor must have been an extremely unexpected factor in Avos's calculations. There was even a chance of Sheila's spiritosis being completely cured—if that had happened, his plan would have fallen apart. And so, he had plotted to show the spectators just how weak the adamantine sword was without letting me catch on.

"Sheila recovered after the finals started, right?" I asked.

"Yes," Misa replied. "I was trying to transfer my magic through Lyria, but it wasn't working out very well... Then her magic started recovering out of the blue, and before I knew it, she was on her feet. That was when we hurried to

the arena, but...”

Melheis had claimed he had healed Sheila in order to use her as a hostage, but that had of course been a lie. He hadn’t wanted me to realize Sheila had recovered against his intentions.

“Since the crowd was so absorbed in our sword fight, they believed the rumor all the more.”

That was also the reason she had been able to transform into her true form, a form similar to the adamantine sword. A spirit’s true form was the embodiment of their rumor or legend, and at the core of that was the heart. Clear in the hearts of the audience was an image of what a sword forged by a true artisan should look like. They had seen my adamantine sword in person, after all. That was why Sheila’s true form had mimicked it. The combination of the rumors had given her that shape.

“Thank you, Anos. You really are as amazing as Lay described. I was sure it was over for me...” Sheila said, still hugging Lay. “But now I can keep watching him grow.”

“There’s no need to thank me. I merely lent a hand to a friend.” I turned on my heel. “See you later, Lay. I’ll be going ahead.”

“Later,” Lay replied tearily.

Figuring he wouldn’t want to be seen crying, I made a quick departure.

“Anos!”

Mom, dad, and Misha had come down from the stands.

“Way to go, son! You really did it! That’s my boy!” Dad tapped me in the chest with his fist.

“Dad,” I said, showing him my sword in its sheath, “your sword saved me.”

“D-Don’t be silly! It’s embarrassing being told that in person...”

Happy tears welled in the corner of dad’s eyes.

It was true, though. The sword didn’t possess any magic, making it effectively useless for fighting in a tournament of this caliber, but that was the exact

reason Sheila had been saved. Dad may not have done it on purpose, but my victory had been thanks to him.

Thanks to dad putting his heart into making the sword, I had made that speech during the first round. That moment had led to Sheila being cured of her spiritosis. The sword dad had forged for me had brought me good fortune.

“We should get going soon if we want to get good seats at the closing ceremony, dear,” mom interjected. “Anos needs to get ready as well.”

“R-Right, of course. Later, Anos!” Dad raised his hand. I lifted mine to mirror him, and he high-fived me.

“I’ll see you later,” I said.

“You did so well today, Anos, dear!” mom exclaimed happily. “It was an incredible fight! If you can win the Demon Sword Tournament at such a young age, I can’t imagine what’s in store for your future!” she chirped, then looked at my wounds with concern. “But you have a lot of injuries. Are you okay?”

“Yeah.”

They were only minor injuries, so I took a moment to heal them with Ent.

“See, now I’m fine.”

“Thank goodness.” Mom leaned in close to whisper into my ear. “I’ll go and give Lay’s mother my greetings later.”

Hmm. That would be bad. Unlike with Azesith, it would be rather difficult to free Sheila from mom’s dimension.

“I would advise against it for today.”

“Really? Oh, don’t tell me... She still doesn’t know, does she? I see! Okay then!” Mom seemed to have come to her own conclusion. “I’ll leave it to another day. See you soon, dear!”

She and dad hurried off to the venue of the closing ceremony.

“Are you happy?” Misha asked, having made her way to my side at some point.

“Do I look that way to you?”

She nodded silently, peering into my abyss with her Magic Eyes—right down to the bottom of my heart.

“Parents sure are a nice thing. I’ve never had any before.”

“Yeah,” Misha agreed.

“I wonder if I’ll be like that if I ever have kids.”

“WHAT?!” someone barked from behind us.

“What are you so shocked about, Sasha?”

“I...I’m not shocked...”

Hmm. What kind of lie was that?

“Do you really intend on having kids?” she asked.

“Maybe someday.”

“I...I see. Hmm. Someday, huh...”

All Seven Demon Elders had my blood running through their veins, so their relatives were my descendants. But after seeing mom, dad, and Sheila, I had a feeling parenthood was about more than just blood relation.

“He he,” Misha giggled.

“I know there’s no chance, really,” I admitted.

Misha shook her head. “You’d make a great father.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

That was rather hard to believe.

“Worried?”

“No. I trust your opinion, Misha.”

I turned around to the girl behind me, who still seemed lost in her thoughts.
“What are you doing, Sasha? Let’s go.”

“I...I’m coming!” she exclaimed, hurrying up to join us.

“I won, by the way.”

“Isn’t it a bit late for that?” Sasha snapped. “With your strength, that was always a given.”

“Well, that’s true.”

“Did you have fun?” Misha asked.

“I did.”

An uneventful sword tournament with nothing on the line. A proxy war between Royalists and Unitarians. Everyone yelling at the top of their lungs.

All kinds of trouble had happened in these two festival-like days, but that last match with Lay had been the most meaningful. But now that it was over, it was oddly quiet.

What was this feeling? I’d never experienced it back when every choice was a matter of life or death.

“That was a rather pleasant tournament.”

There was barely anyone left in the audience. The quiet aftermath of the festivities had me almost reluctant to walk away.

The End.

Afterword

In volume two, we welcome the boisterous girls of the Anos Fan Union.

I originally created them to depict the discrimination against hybrids by royalty, but then I had the bright idea to turn them into the school life trope of a fan club. Everything spiraled out of control from there.

They were meant to be background characters, so I had no plans of giving them plot relevance, personalities, or any speaking lines at all. But once I started writing, they started saying strange things of their own accord. At first I was like, “Well, it’s not *that* bad...” and submitted the chapter anyway. This series was originally a web novel, so I received reviews per chapter—and to my surprise, the girls were more well received than I’d anticipated.

That sense of validation was probably what drove me closer and closer to insanity. Before I knew it, they were singing weird songs. I hesitated a lot before hitting the submit button on that chapter, but it was just a few lines, so I figured it would be okay.

Oddly enough, the readers loved it. And so, I got carried away and wrote the lyrics for another song. If I could make just one excuse for myself, I’d say it’s really difficult to put across a song with no sound. That was how, while I was trying to make a song with a lasting impression using lyrics alone, the lyric “I’m on top, and you’re below,” was born.

Thus, the character development of the fan union girls was established, all guided by my readers. “Melody from the Flames” wasn’t one of the chapters I’d planned from the get-go either. I believe all of this was only possible thanks to the web novel format.

On a different note, one of the best parts of a novelization has to be the illustrations. Seeing the characters I’ve been writing for a year come to life is always so exciting, and Shizumayoshinori has done yet another wonderful job. The Anos on the cover is just so handsome, I can’t get enough. Thank you so much.

I would like to thank my editor, Yoshioka, for all your work once again. There was a high word count in this volume, so it took quite the effort to put it all together.

Finally, I'd like to thank the readers from the bottom of my heart. In the next volume, Anos will finally get to the bottom of a major mystery. The book's packed full of exciting twists and turns, and the web novel readers enjoyed it a lot, so please look forward to it. I'll do my best revising it into a more enjoyable reading experience.

SHU

1 June 2018



story by †
SHU
illustrated by †
Shizumayoshinori

2



Misa Illiorogue

Anos's hardworking classmate who is all smiles despite her white-uniform status.

Lay Grandsley

A transfer student known as the Demon Swordmaster, yet has a very easygoing personality.

Anos Voldigoad

The reincarnated form of the composed, fearless, indomitable and confident Demon King of Tyranny.



Sasha Necron

Descendant of a powerful magic family, the assertive and confident older twin sister to Misha.

If you want to see my body so badly, Sasha, then I'll show you-I'll grant you a look of my naked body in person!

Why are you stripping here?!
You idiot!

Misha Necron

Quiet and reserved classmate of Anos's, and his first friend after his reincarnation.



story by †
SHU
illustrated by †
Shizumayoshinori

2

The Misfit of Demon King Academy



Misa Illiorogue

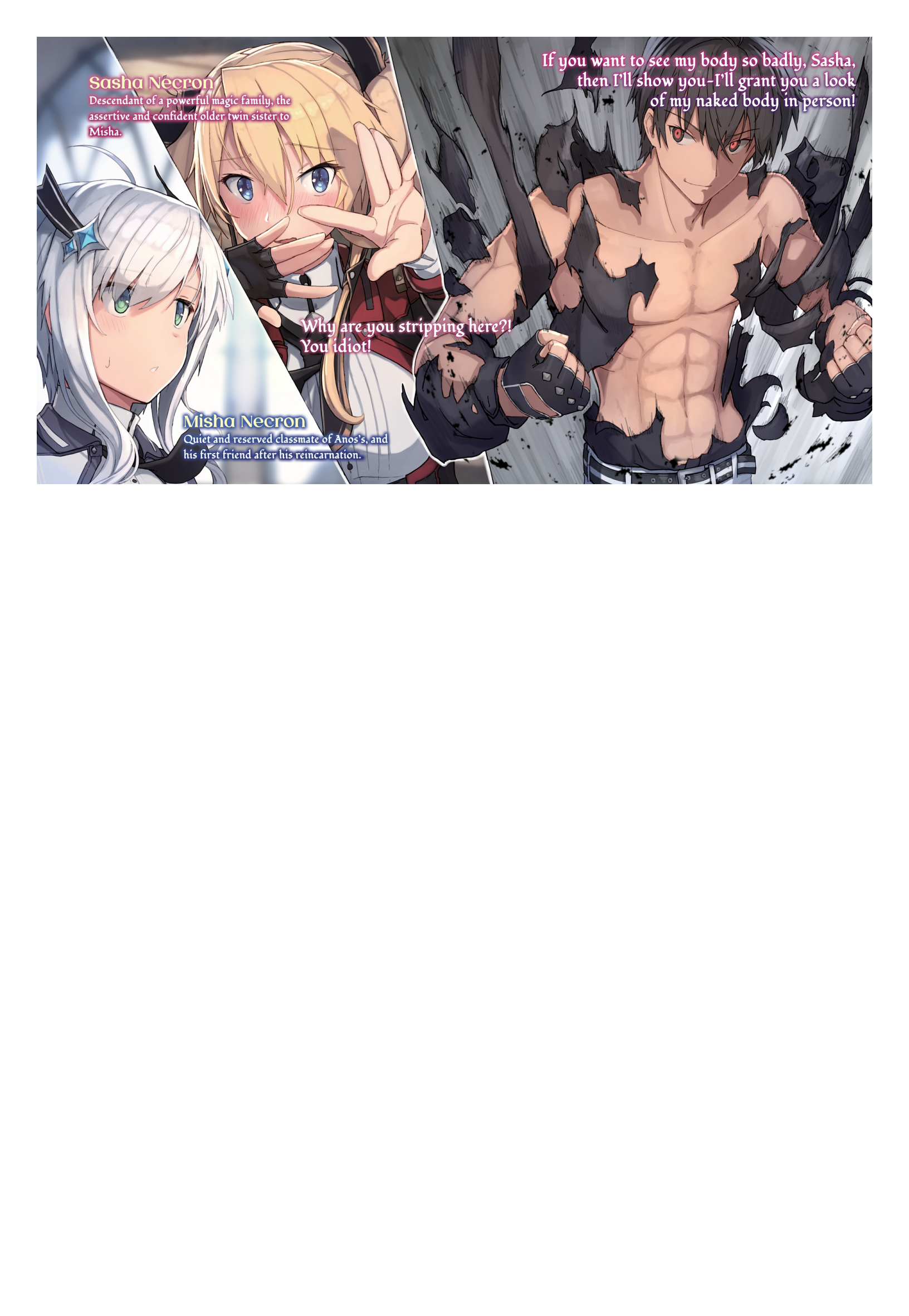
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Sasha Necron

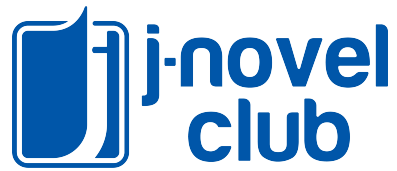
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The Misfit of Demon King Academy: Volume 2

by SHU

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Edited by Stephanie Buck

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